銃皇無尽のファフニール X

インビジブル・サクセサー

ツカサ
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銃皇無尽のファフニール

インビジブル・サクセサー

X

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けれどきっと——自信がないからこそ、
人間は他人と約束を交わすのだろう。
そう考えて、俺はイリスの細い小指に誓いを立てる。
「モノノベ、一緒に頑張ろうね！」
イリス・フレイア
Iris Freyja

「頑張れるか？」
「さっきまでは……無理だと思ってた」
「今は？」
「不思議と、頑張れそうな気がしてる」
強がりではなく、
正直な感覚として俺はそう告げた。
シャルロット・B・ロード
Charlotte B Lord
物部悠
Yuu Mononobe

アリエラの下腹部に俺の手が誘われていく。
その状況に顔が熱くなり、体が強張った。
指先が、お湯の中で柔らかい肌に触れる。
「あっ……そこ、違う……
もうちょっと上――
指、そのまま動かさないで」
喘ぎに似た声を漏らし、
アリエラが真っ赤な顔で手の位置を修正する。
アリエラ・ルー
Ariella Lu

銃皇無尽のファフニール

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Unlimited Fafnir Volume 10

Prologue

A few hours prior to Ariella's termination of her "everyday life"...

Having broken Midgardsormr's defense network, NIFL's inspection delegates landed successively on the shores of Midgard, the educational institution for people with the power of dark matter generation.

(—So that is the vanguard.)

Mica Stuart gazed at the approaching men in army uniforms while silently adjusting her breathing.

As the personal secretary of Midgard's chief administrator, Charlotte B. Lord, Mica handled the majority of day-to-day business on her behalf. Currently, Mica was hidden amidst lush tropical vegetation, concealing her presence.

Rustle, rustle, rustle—

Accompanied by rhythmic sounds of footsteps, dark shadows moved across the ground, sweeping past the trees that served as Mica's hiding place.

NIFL's landed troops were walking on a paved road less than one meter away from Mica. Every soldier was carrying automatic small arms while clad in black armored protectors. Visiting Midgard under the pretext of inspection, their equipment was definitely way overboard. Under the scorching sun, they must be feeling extremely hot.

(Oh well, in regards to dressing inappropriately for the season, I am in the same position.)

Recalling her own anachronistic maid uniform, Mica smiled wryly.

Designed to expose as little skin as possible, the maid uniform's sleeves were as long as the skirt. In the harsh outdoor heat, wearing it was honestly quite an ordeal.

Nevertheless, ever since she started serving Charlotte, Mica had never spent a single waking second of her life without wearing this maid uniform.

Her attire was determined by her position. Mica wore this outfit as a reminder of the "way of life" she had chosen.

As for the NIFL soldiers' combat gear, that too was due to the responsibilities of their job.

In other words, what was starting now was not an inspection but a war between Midgard and NIFL.

However, unlike NIFL, whose actions were justified by the name of inspection, Midgard did not have a righteous cause to resist them.

Hence, such a cause must be created first and foremost.

Mica recalled her mission, firmly engraved in her heart, while waiting for the formation of NIFL troops to pass by. However, she had no intention of allowing them to pass through just like that. The soldiers were advancing towards the school grounds and the girls dormitories, which would spell defeat on Midgard's side if they were to take control of either destination.

"—"

Mica exhaled deeply then slowly drew out the dagger from the scabbard at her waist.

This dagger's blade was already dyed red from blood. In truth, it had not harmed any victim. This blood was the linchpin for exerting dominance, conferred by the master.

Just a single person would be enough—She must drive this linchpin of dominance into one of them without alerting the others!

The instant a soldier at the end of the procession passed by, Mica rushed out of the dense foliage with a slash of the dagger.

The blade accurately struck a gap in his protector, leaving a shallow scratch on the soldier's skin.

"!?"

Noticing the noise and pain, the soldier looked back swiftly and aimed his gun at Mica. With just a slight delay, the other soldiers turned around and raised their weapons together.

But within that instant of an opening, Mica had already hidden the dagger inside her sleeth. Only the soldier at the tail of the procession was aware that he had been scratched. However, Mica no longer needed to concern herself with that.

"My name is Mica Stuart. I am the personal secretary of Charlotte-sama, Midgard's chief administrator. I have received orders to lead the way for you during this inspection."

Before they could interrogate her, Mica introduced herself respectfully.

Mica could hear troubled feelings mixed among the noisy voices.

Amidst a tense silence, Mica slowly lifted her head as though giving time for the soldiers to awaken from their shock.

Hence, the soldiers, whose bodies were stiff from nervousness, gradually relaxed their expressions. Perhaps they felt relief after noticing that Mica was a "mature woman."

They were probably the most wary against users of dark matter who possessed powers transcending human common sense. The girls known as Ds would lose their powers during pregnancy or after the age of

twenty or so. In other words, the fact that Mica was an adult stood as evidence that she was not a D.

"—Put your guns down."

A man, apparently the leader, issued the order. The NIFL soldiers all lowered their guns for now with the only exception being the soldier whom Mica had scratched with the dagger.

This was only natural. The master he obeyed was no longer the leader of this unit.

'Attack.'

Through the blood flowing into him, he heard his master's voice faintly.

Midgard needed an excuse. An excuse allowing them to engage in self-defense.

And right now, such an excuse was nowhere to be found. Hence, they must create their own excuse.

Obeying the master's command, the soldier pulled the trigger.

The sound of heavy gunfire was produced consecutively. After confirming that several shots had pierced her body, Mica felt intense pain that seemed as though it would burn up her consciousness.

"What are you doing!?"

The other soldiers reacted in alarm and subdued him, thus halting the sound of gunfire. However, he began to bite his comrades' arms in an apparent state of insanity.

Watching them, Mica applied pressure to her bleeding abdomen while speaking to the NIFL soldiers.

"NIFL's hostile action... confirmed. Midgard shall invoke right to self-defense... From this point onwards, Midgard shall switch to defense. We

have recorded evidence... Do not even think about denial of responsibility."

Mica motioned with gaze towards the security cameras installed on the road's outdoor lighting.

Although achieved through forcible means, NIFL's culpability was now an accomplished fact. With this, NIFL could no longer unilaterally claim the side of justice.

"No, what just happened was—"

One of the soldiers tried to argue but his eyes lost focus when a berserk comrade bit him.

The bitten soldiers slowly turned their heads towards their other teammates.

"What the hell is going on...?"

Swallowed by this bizarre atmosphere, they raised their guns partially on instinct.

However, these men in extremely abnormal states attacked their teammates instead, showing no fear in the face of guns.

Screams and gunshots reverberated.

"....."

Mica took her eyes off the tragic scene of carnage. Dragging her body that was starting to repair itself autonomously, she departed.

There was no going back now. Her heart was occupied by mild regret and worry for her master.

'I will use this authority to protect the world. However—I do not know if humanity can be saved.'

Past words said by her previous master, Leonardo B. Lord, seemed to ring in Mica's ears.

Currently, Charlotte must be making the same expression as Mica's former master had in the past. Amidst the intense pain that was disrupting her consciousness, Mica was filled with sad certainty.

*

"Major Loki, members of the landing contingent have started slaughtering one another—"

"Due to the first contingent opening fire and causing casualties, Midgard has issued an official protest to us, declaring the invocation of their right to self-defense—"

"Multiple barriers have been confirmed, deployed by Ds to surround the school grounds at Midgard's center as well as the dormitories. Breaking through with infantry firepower will be a challenge!"

Loki Jotunheim frowned slightly in response to the succession of displeasing reports.

Communication officers staying on the Naglfar's bridge were turning livid due to the unexpected situation, their voices growing shrill. Signs of fear were appearing on their faces.

Surely they must find the phenomenon of soldiers suddenly engaging in mutual slaughter quite incomprehensible. However, Loki already expected this.

(—Gray's authority huh?)

Charlotte B. Lord was definitely the reason why the soldiers had gone berserk.

It was common knowledge among the ruling class that she was virtually immortal and wielded powers capable of interfering with the human mind and body.

A number of people in the ruling class had "contracted" with Charlotte. By accepting Charlotte's dominance, they would receive her protection and become immune to disease.

Although death from old age or mortal wounds resulting from major loss of body parts could not be prevented, a "life in good health" was probably more valuable than anything for the rich and powerful.

Becoming Gray's servants on their own volition, these people lurked in governments, financial groups and businesses in various countries, taking action as extensions of her limbs whenever necessary. The berserk soldiers were most likely in a similar state.

However, the soldiers were supposed to be purged of traitors. Within organizations, NIFL was the only one that had successfully eliminated all servants of Gray.

Hence, this was probably an attack initiated by her. It would be easy to prove which side instigated hostilities first. Naturally, securing victory was a minimum prior condition.

"Deploy unmanned weapons. Leave the ground invasion and suppression of berserk soldiers to them. Order intact teams to advance towards Midgard's core from underground."

Loki read from the monitors on the bridge while calmly issuing orders.

This level of resistance was within expectation. He had already prepared countermeasures.

It would be impossible for ordinary forces to breach areas where Ds could use their powers on a large scale. However, chances of victory were very much in NIFL's favor for close-quarters combat in cramped underground environments. Ds were unused to combat against humans. Besides, virtually none of them were capable of murder.

Hence, Midgard would fall eventually as long as they invaded from underground. As for the barriers above ground, it would be possible to breach them using heavy weaponry.

(Gray is thinking that stalling for time would be enough—Too foolish and naive a notion.)

Glancing at a monitor that showed a timer for when the operation had started, Loki steepled his fingers together.

Even though the organization had been purged of Gray's servants, NIFL was still under the command of Asgard, which remained under her influence. Hence, she still held the reins of power.

It was only a matter of time before the order for an imposed inspection would be rescinded. Be that as it may, Gray and Midgard's fates were already sealed. Rather, it would be better to say that the outcome they were facing was going to be more tragic the more they resisted.

"—*I have already killed you all*. Destiny is set in stone."

Loki muttered quietly while gazing sharply at Midgard's image on a monitor.

Chapter 1 - Midgard in Turmoil

Part 1

The sound of footsteps from multiple people echoed within a dark and enclosed space.

The meandering staircase seemed endless no matter how far we climbed, causing my feet to feel heavy—However, by the time I thought back to the time when I first descended these stairs, we were almost about to reach the bottom of the clock tower.

"Mononobe~"

Hearing the slightly exhausted voice from behind, I paused at a landing in the staircase.

I looked back to see the panting silver-haired girl—Iris Freyja—looking up at me from the step below me. I could not see the others because the view was blocked by the twisting staircase, but I could hear their footsteps behind me.

Several hours earlier, we had felt a tremor originating from the ground surface... Next, Ariella's betrayal came to light. Since the underground cavern's secrecy might have been compromised, we decided our whole group would head up to the surface.

Our current goal was to confirm what had happened on ground level and find a new hiding place for Shion and Jeanne. *Rescuing* Ariella was also imperative.

"You're climbing too fast~ Let's take a short break..."

Iris reached out to me and pleaded. I sighed deeply.

"Didn't I say I'll head out first to make sure it's safe? There's no need to force yourself to keep up with my pace."

"B-But what if something happened to you while you're alone, Mononobe!?"

Climbing the stairs faster than she could handle, beads of perspiration kept appearing on Iris' forehead, but she stared at me seriously.

"Am I that untrusted?"

"Because lately... Mononobe, you keep taking action alone. That's not good, right?"

"Ouch."

I fell silent for a moment because her comment struck a sore spot.

That time at the mountain villa, the plan to intercept NIFL had failed because I had separated from the others to act alone. Also during the battle against Kraken Zwei, it was Iris who had saved me from the hopeless situation. Hence, I had no words to refute her.

"That's why I want to follow you as much as possible. R-Right now, Mononobe... I-I am your mate."

Iris blushed red and spoke quietly in embarrassment.

I noticed my face heating up because of her words. However, there was something I had to consider carefully before fighting alongside her.

"—By the way, Iris, can you still use Catastrophe?"

Due to getting marked by me and turned into my kind, it was highly likely that her abilities were affected in addition to her body. During the battle against Kraken Zwei, Iris' staff had turned into a part of her body during the dragonification process, even allowing her to produce the "Third Eye."

"Oh, yes, in a way. We at least confirmed it when I was examined."

"In a way?"

The ambiguous answer made me frown.

"Umm, how should I put it...? Before, I knew how to use Catastrophe without needing to think at all... But I can't do it anymore, no matter what. Because of that, I can't use it unless I transmute dark matter."

"I see—So now it's the same for you like how it is for me and Mitsuki."

Like Iris, Mitsuki and I had inherited powers from dragons—antigravitational matter, Ether Wind, antimatter—And they could only be used by transmuting dark matter. In control of Yggdrasil, Tia also used electricity generated from the transmutation of dark matter in order to connect to the plant network.

However, Iris alone had been able to use Catastrophe directly. Hence, her body had transformed to *accommodate power*, according to Vritra's explanation.

Having lost this unique aspect of hers, Iris could no longer use Catastrophe beyond her capacity to generate dark matter. Neither would she dragonify like before, I suppose.

However—as the one who had marked her, I might be a dragon, which meant it was possible that Iris had simply turned into "my kind"—another type of dragon...

"That's why I can't attack at a moment's notice like before. And it might explode with a bang like when I generated dark matter in the past."

Iris waved her hands to gesture but I smiled wryly at the thought of her "special skill."

"No matter what you're transmuting, Iris, your dark matter always explodes. Also, Catastrophe's effect cannot be controlled. So don't use them on humans, okay?"

"Sheesh, of course I know that. Mononobe, it's you who should take more care, okay?"

Iris pouted slightly and stared at me.

"Me?"

"That's right. You might have to fight people from NIFL later, so don't go overboard, okay? *Killing is wrong*!"

Bam—These words caused my chest to tighten.

Iris was bringing up matter-of-fact common sense. A moral worldview shared by all humans. However, I had not used this kind of perspective to distinguish good from evil for a long time now.

During my training under Major Loki at NIFL, I had turned into someone "capable of killing at will."

In the past series of battles, I had gradually lost the luxury of choosing "not to kill." In the battles against Hreidmar, I had fought with clear intent to kill. Although the defeated armored soldiers were empty

inside, if they were transformed humans as Major Loki had claimed... I might have committed murder already.

But before that...

"Very well, I got it... I'll remember. Killing people is not our goal. We are trying to rescue Ariella and protect Charl—the principal."

I answered, as though carving these words upon my heart. These were the reasons why we had left the underground hot spring and were currently climbing this long staircase.

Just as Iris had said, killing was definitely wrong. No matter what the reason, it was not an option that should be chosen.

"Then Mononobe, it's a promise!"

Iris nodded deeply and extended her little finger towards me.

"...I promise."

After a moment of hesitation, I entwined my little finger with Iris'.

Optimistic thinking was beyond me. I generally had a tendency to imagine the worst-case scenario. If a situation arose where I had to take a life in order to protect Iris and the others, I did not have the confidence to keep this promise.

On the other hand, people surely exchanged promises with one another precisely because they lacked confidence.

Thinking that, I promised Iris while interlocking our little fingers together.

"Mononobe, let's give it our best together!"

Iris smiled cheerfully and released her little finger.

"—Yeah."

Her smiling face was the one thing I did not want to betray.

"Mm!"

Next, I heard a voice expressing agreement. Having caught up during our break, the petite red-haired girl—Ren Miyazawa—looked up at us with her tiny fist clenched tightly.

"Onee-chan must be saved. Whatever it takes."

She declared strongly and ran up to us. Overtaking Iris and coming to my side, she held my hand tightly.

Next, the rest of the girls arrived one after another and looked at Ren and me.

"Yes, we must save Ariella... We haven't heard her story properly yet."

The girl who normally gave off a spaced-out impression, Firill Crest, concurred with Ren whose eyes were showing intense determination.

Lisa Highwalker tossed her long blonde hair and nodded at them.

"Indeed—There must be some sort of reason. Since Ariella-san is the kind of person who can do anything on their own, she must have reached a conclusion on her own to say nothing to anyone. Goodness gracious... My friends are full of these people who get stuck in their stubborn ways of thinking, how troublesome."

Lisa glanced sideways at my foster sister, Mitsuki.

"...Why are you looking towards me, Lisa-san?"

"Oh my? Would you like me to explain?"

Confronted with Lisa's mischievous expression, Mitsuki went red and averted her gaze.

"N-No, it is fine... I am aware of my similarities with Ariella-san."

Mitsuki replied with some embarrassment. She must be recalling how she had entered conflicts with Lisa many times due to her own obstinate views on the Shinomiya Miyako incident.

Next, Mitsuki held her hand against her chest with a somewhat weary expression. She was panting heavily, probably exhausted from climbing all these stairs in one go. Upon closer examination, I noticed that the redness of her face was not purely due to embarrassment.

"Mitsuki, are you okay? Just take a break if you're tired, or..."

I stopped mid-sentence and looked at Jeanne Hortensia. Although she was dressed in Midgard's male school uniform like me, Jeanne was genuinely female. Back in NIFL, she belonged to the same unit as me, serving as the sniper due to her rare "eyes" of outstanding talent.

And right now, Jeanne was carrying a purple-haired girl on her back. The girl was named Shion Zwei Shinomiya. As the daughter of the Krakenified Shinomiya Miyako, she currently adored Jeanne as family.

"Captain?"

"...Papa?"

Making eye contact with me, Jeanne and Shion tilted their heads in puzzlement. Worried that Shion would experience feelings as my mate, Jeanne had taught Shion that she and I were her family—Still, I had yet to get used to being called "Papa."

However, Shion would feel insecure if I were to look troubled, so I tried to smile back at the two of them as naturally as possible.

"C-C-C-Captain, if you stare at me like this... It would feel a bit..."

I ended up causing Shion to smile with delight while Jeanne lowered her head, slightly flustered.

Seeing them like that, Mitsuki realized what I was suggesting and her face turned even redder.

"No, there is no need for you to carry me! Also, I do not need a break. Our first priority is to make haste and intercept Ariella-san right now!"

Mitsuki refused in a fluster. Nevertheless, as her family and someone who had been living with her for a long time, I could definitely tell that her condition was not normal.

Ever since she transformed into my kind yesterday after making contact with me, Mitsuki had looked very lethargic. She had claimed it was probably dizziness due to soaking in the hot spring for too long, but I concluded it was necessary to consider the effects of being turned into my kind.

Furthermore, Lisa, Firill and the others had gone through their transformations without anything unusual, yet Mitsuki had quite an intense reaction during the process. Although the reason was unknown, it seemed like Mitsuki's body was enduring greater strain than the others.

"—No need to hurry so much. This route leads directly to the bottom of the clock tower. That girl apparently took route that emerges from ground level at the dorms. Since her target is this school's principal, it is all but assured that we will arrive ahead of her."

The one who interjected was the unmotivated Kili Surtr Muspelheim.

She was neither close with Ariella nor had any reason to protect Charlotte, which was why she felt no urgency.

"That being said, we cannot afford to dally while it is unknown how much time remains. Nii-san, let us proceed."

Saying that, Mitsuki began to ascend the stairs. Since she was giving this look of "I shall venture forth even if all of you stop here," I had no choice but to start moving forward again.

"Yuu! Since Mitsuki will walk on her own, Tia wants to be carried!"

But before long, I heard Tia Lightning's voice from behind. I looked back while climbing the stairs, only to see Tia staring at me with her glimmering ruby-like eyes.

"Sure—"

It was fine since she was tired. Just as I nodded in consent, Vritra objected from beside Tia.

"Wait. If thou art going to carry someone, carry me. I am tired of walking."

Identical to Kili in appearance except two sizes smaller, Vritra was climbing the stairs with an expression of utter irritation. Even if one were to tell others that she was the cause of the first dragon disaster that had plunged mankind into panic—the Black Dragon—no one would probably believe it.

"Tia is tired!"

"I am more tired."

"Tia is more more tired!"

Tia and Vritra began a fruitless debate. Although I had no idea how to handle this, Lisa smiled benevolently and said, "Since you both have the strength to fight like this, it implies that you can still climb on your own, doesn't it?", prompting the two of them to shut up immediately.

"Oh, Mononobe! It's a door!"

Iris interjected at just the right moment and pointed up the stairs.

"...Mm."

Ren gripped my hand tightly with nervousness in her demeanor.

"Let's advance as quietly as possible from here on."

I turned my head back, lowered my voice and said to the group. Iris and the girls nodded.

Leading the way, I ascended the stairs quietly and stood in front of the heavy door. There was neither a door knob nor a keyhole. Beside it was a circular handle, probably meant to be rotated in order to open and close the door.

I focused my mind to listen for sounds on the other side of the door. There were no human voices. Neither could I sense any killing intent.

After asking everyone to back away slightly, I turned the handle and the door opened automatically with heavy noise of vibration.

The other side of the door was much brighter than the staircase side. I squinted and observed the surrounding situation. Exposed pipes were running along the passage's ceiling and walls. No one seemed to be here. However, something was different compared to the last time I passed through on my way down.

"Follow me, everyone."

I said to the girls as they stepped into the passage.

"Onii-chan... What's wrong?"

The first to catch up was Ren, who asked in head-tilted puzzlement.

"The route Mica-san showed me has been blocked."

I pointed at the other end of the passage and explained. It looked like it had been blocked off by a very thick partition.

"Then we have to find a detour...?"

Firill murmured, but on the side, Lisa shook her head after giving it a moment's thought.

"Midgard is probably safeguarding against underground invasions. The other passage must surely be the same. In that case, wouldn't it be faster to contact Shinomiya-sensei to have her open the partition?"

Hearing that, Iris brightened up in demeanor.

"Oh right! Although we couldn't use our terminals in the cave, there's reception here!"

"Then allow me to contact Shinomiya-sensei..."

Mitsuki nodded and took out her portable terminal. However, Kili grabbed Mitsuki's shoulder from behind to stop her.

"Hold on. It's better not to underestimate NIFL. Don't you agree, Jeanne-chan?"

Kili looked suggestively at Jeanne, a former member of NIFL. Jeanne frowned slightly and nodded.

"...Yes. Now that NIFL has landed on the island, it would be best not to use communication devices lightly. They might be eavesdropping."

"Ea-ves-drop-ping? Ea-ves-drop-ping?"

Curious about the term, Shion was innocently repeating it while piggybacking on Jeanne.

"It means listening secretly. But it's true that we don't want them to know about our position and situation."

While explaining to Shion, I acknowledged Kili's viewpoint. Then Mitsuki frowned.

"Be that as it may... Are we going to break the partition in order to move forward?"

In order to get there before Ariella, we could not afford to waste time. Although this might aid NIFL, there was no other choice. Just as I was thinking that, someone tugged the corner of my shirt from the side.

I looked there, only to see Tia looking up at me, smiling.

"No problem! Leave it to Tia!"

Walking briskly, Tia approached the partition and pressed her hand on the control panel next to it.

With a spark of electricity near the red horns on her head, followed by a heavy sound of turning, the partition opened.

"Wow..."

Impressed, I exclaimed and Tia puffed out her little chest proudly.

"Compared to hacking Yggdrasil, this kind of machine is too easy! Tia will close it up properly once we all pass through. NIFL won't get easy pickings!"

Listening to her, Kili smiled with satisfaction.

"Fufu, as expected of my Tia. There is no computer in this world that can compare to her, having obtained Yggdrasil's processing power."

Kili probably thought of herself as the one who had raised Tia, but I noticed Lisa's brow twitching on the side.

"Tia-san, you are truly amazing. Recently, you have been helping out all the time."

Walking over to Tia, Lisa bent down and smiled.

"Ehehe... Thanks. But Lisa helped Tia even more."

Hugged by Lisa, Tia smiled demurely. While caressing Tia's head tenderly, Lisa secretly glanced at Kili.

"Hmm..."

Seeing Lisa's actions and gaze that seemed to declare "Tia is not yours," Kili looked displeased.

"Another partition lies ahead. Could you take care of it again?"

"Yes!"

Nodding energetically, Tia held Lisa's hand and walked over there.

While following them, I whispered to the displeased-looking Kili.

"—Although it's not my place to say this, I don't think you can win against Lisa on this front."

"I know that."

Frowning unhappily, Kili replied.

"The moment she decided to live on as a human, it was no longer possible for her to get close to me, the one who had killed her 'human parents.'"

Kili lowered her voice, speaking only loud enough for me to hear. This was the first time for her to broach the subject ever since she joined us.

I took a breath and voiced a concern that had been occupying my heart for a long time now.

"Why did you kill them...? It wasn't necessary to go that far, was it?"

"No, it was necessary. Even now, I still believe I did nothing wrong."

Kili instantly replied in an icy voice.

"Hmm... But Tia was living happily with her parents, right? You destroyed that life and did nothing wrong, are you serious—"

I could not help but find my voice getting louder, so I stopped mid-sentence. Kili responded to my anger with a wry smile.

"Happiness for Tia was not necessarily happiness for her parents."

"...What do you mean?"

After hearing Kili's profound statement, I suppressed my anger and asked. Next, she questioned me instead.

"An armed organization captured Tia before, right?"

"That's right—Those people took her parents hostage and forced her to create gemstones. I was the one who rescued her from there."

After I nodded, Kili smiled sardonically.

"Hostages... eh? Were it not so, they wouldn't have *tried to sell their daughter off again*."

"What...?"

Was it because I reacted with bated breath exactly as she had predicted? Kili continued with a look of satisfaction.

"The involvement of a large organization is required to efficiently convert gemstones and precious metals into cash. Hence, her parents began to search for a new buyer. However, the news spread too much because they were too unprincipled, finally reaching an anti-dragon organization..."

Anti-dragon organization was the umbrella term for groups of people who hated dragons and treated Ds with hostility, considering them to be on the side of dragons. Naturally, because killing a dragon was impossible for them no matter how much they wanted to, their activities were specifically limited to the likes of fighting dragon-worshiping organizations or antagonizing Ds through witch hunts. In the past, Ariella had belonged to a similar organization.

"Wait, since things ended up that way—"

"Indeed, an attack from those believing themselves to be 'justice,' of course."

Kili shrugged and nodded with a mocking expression.

"Arriving as the official buyer, but a step too late, I fought off those people.. But Tia's parents were mortally wounded by then. From Tia's perspective, it probably looked like I had brought men to attack her parents."

"Huh...?"

In that case, Kili was not the one who had murdered Tia's parents. However, she looked at me with a smile of self-deprecation and shook her head.

"Normally speaking, I could have used biogenic transmutation to save them even if the wounds were hopeless. However, I 'cremated' them instead of doing that."

Kili distanced herself from me, hinting for this whispered conversation to conclude.

After we passed through, the partition automatically closed, and Tia began to work on opening the next partition.

Halting my steps while watching all this, I said to Kili.

"What you told me just now—Does Tia know?"

"No, you're the first to know."

Kili turned her gaze to Tia and answered softly.

"Why didn't you tell her?"

"Even if I told her things that she did not witness personally, she would treat them as lies. It would also taint her memories. Nothing good would come out of it."

Kili replied in resignation.

At this moment, the second partition opened with a deep rumbling noise. While confirming there were no enemies on the other side, I looked at Kili.

"—Sure enough, I take back what I said earlier."

It was not something I could judge on my own—I did not know everything about Kili.

"Huh?"

Kili was looking at me in puzzlement. I said to her with a smile:

"What I said about how you can't win against Lisa. If you're envious, just stop thinking too much and go hold Tia's hand."

Kili was being considerate for Tia in her own way. If this could be conveyed to Tia, surely—

"Wait, h-how did you reach this conclusion? Guh, s-stop pushing me!"

Pushing Kili's back while she was showing a rare unsettled look for once, I walked over to Tia and the others.

Part 2

After opening countless partitions, we finally reached the elevator.

Was it due to the defense emergency? With doors shut, the elevator was not operational. However, this was also resolved by having Tia hack the system. We got into the cramped elevator car and made our way to the clock tower's top floor.

"Is the principal... still in her usual room?"

Iris murmured worriedly.

"It's possible that she went elsewhere... But anyway, let's check first."

Although I felt that she should be in her office or personal room, it was also possible for her to be at the command center or the underground shelter. Considering our objective of finding the principal before Ariella did, checking the principal's office first was the best option.

"We might suddenly encounter NIFL's forces and Ariella-san. Please prepare yourselves to fight, everyone."

After Mitsuki reminded in a sharp tone of voice, everyone generated their respective fictional armaments.

"—AT Nergal."

Considering this was going to be anti-personnel combat, I used transmutation to create a projectile-based electroshock gun instead of a fictional armament.

Holding the gun's solid grip with both hands, I waited for the moment for us to arrive at the top floor.

With a light electronic sound, the elevator stopped.

"I will generate an air barrier."

Firill took a step forward and placed her hand on her book-shaped fictional armament.

"Generating air in a narrow space will increase air pressure dramatically. Please construct the barrier concurrent with the door's opening."

"Yes, I understand."

Firill nodded to acknowledge Mitsuki's reminder. The moment the elevator doors opened, intense wind blew. This was probably the barrier Firill erected by generating a large volume of air.

At the same time, I raised Nergal in case enemies appeared. However, there were no signs of anyone on the other side of the elevator doors.

"We worried needlessly..."

After Lisa murmured while looking down the empty corridor, Firill lowered her hand in relief. Was it because the barrier was released? The wind suddenly stopped.

"—Let's go."

I took the lead and walked out of the elevator, then stopped in front of the principal's office at the end of the corridor

There were no signs of a prior battle nearby. Neither was there any killing intent coming from the room. Concluding that NIFL had yet to reach this place, I cautiously knocked the door.

"Charl, it's me."

I waited for the other side to respond.

"....."

Some kind of weak voice seemed to answer, but I could not hear it clearly. Furthermore, I could hear what appeared to be moaning sounds mixed in there, causing anxiety to sprout spontaneously in my heart.

"Hmm—I'm coming in."

Announcing one-sidedly, I opened the door and was met by a strong smell of blood. The red scene before my eyes stunned me.

Charlotte was sitting in her chair as usual in the back of her office. However, there was a knife stabbed in her chest. The blood pouring out was dyeing her lab coat red.

Blood was spreading on the floor, producing a massive pool of blood. It was hard to imagine that such a volume had bled from her slender body.

"Principal!?"

Mitsuki suddenly called out. On the other hand, Iris and Firill simply stood there without saying a word.

"—Don't look!"

Lisa covered Tia and Ren's eyes. Jeanne also led Shion away to stand in the back of our group.

"Damn it!"

Gnashing my teeth, I stepped into the room.

Did I... arrive a step too late!?

Filled with anxiety, I ran over to Charlotte's side, hoping there ought to be some way to save her. However—

"...Stay away. Don't worry."

With a knife stabbed in her chest, Charlotte stopped me with her hoarse voice. Possibly because talking had caused blood to enter her windpipe, she coughed repeatedly with red droplets of blood flowing out from the corner of her mouth.

"Charl... Are you okay?"

"This isn't enough to kill me. Didn't I tell you before that I'm immortal?"

Charlotte opened her eyes, which had been shut, and smiled.

"Well... That's true indeed..."

I answered in a stutter.

I knew about Charlotte's ability. She had used it to cure me of injuries that would have taken months to recover from. As someone who had entered a blood pact with Charlotte, Shinomiya-sensei had survived a fatal wound. Charlotte herself should be even more "immortal" than that.

However, during our fight, Ariella had clearly said she was going to kill Charlotte. Not only was her combat style was overwhelming but she also seemed to possess something similar in quality to Hreidmar and "Fafnir." In addition, this forcibly imposed inspection was definitely one of Major Loki's plots.

No matter how immortal Charlotte was, there was no guarantee that she would be fine for sure.

Major Loki had ordered me to kill Charlotte... Seeing as that was his objective, it was highly likely that he had prepared multiple backup plans.

"Hmm—It looks like you came to check on me because you were truly worried about me. Thank you, my friend."

After speaking happily, Charlotte pulled out the knife from her chest. Although blood spurted out, it stopped immediately as soon as she applied pressure to the wound.

Standing behind me, Mitsuki and the girls were all holding their breath, extremely worried. Although they had previously heard that Charlotte was a dragon, it was only natural to be shocked when personally witnessing her regenerative powers.

"This knife... You stabbed yourself with it?"

It was the only conclusion based on the scene. I asked in puzzlement.

"Indeed. I needed a bit of blood."

"Blood?"

I looked at the pool of blood on the floor. Upon closer examination, I saw a hole in the floor. Flowing downwards, the blood was draining in that direction.

"My authority takes effect by using bodily fluids as a medium. Consequently, I need a large amount of fresh blood in order to use my ability on a massive scale."

"...I get the reason. But isn't there any other way? Even if it'll heal, it hurts like hell, right?"

Recalling how painful Charlotte looked earlier, I frowned.

"It definitely hurts, but this is the quickest method. My body will recover instantly even if wounded. Well, I guess it looks like I'm forcibly getting the blood out. Now, putting that aside—"

She placed the bloodstained knife on the table and looked at Mitsuki and the girls standing at the door.

"What's the matter? The fact that all of you have come out from underground implies that something must have happened."

Mitsuki and the girls looked at one another then walked into the principal's office.

"Hmm... No, not all of you. One person is missing."

Charlotte seemed to notice Ariella's absence. She questioned me with her gaze, so I explained.

"Ariella has probably met up with NIFL's forces by now and is heading this way."

"...What is going on here?"

Charlotte's expression turned grim as I told her about what had happened.

After learning the cause of Ariella's betrayal, Charlotte crossed her arms with a serious look on her face.

"I see... That person—"

"Yeah—But to the very end, Ariella still cared for Ren. There must be a reason why she's colluding with NIFL."

I touched Ariella's ribbon in my shirt pocket through my clothing.

This ribbon was apparently her first present from Ren, which was why she had given it to me before she soiled her hands.

Although she told me to return the ribbon to Ren, I had no intention of agreeing to her request. I believed that this ribbon should be handed back to Ariella rather than being given back to Ren.

"I don't think Ariella would spread information that will endanger Ren... But it's possible for NIFL to calculate our position based on communications. That's why we all came here."

After I explained, Charlotte passed her gaze back and forth over us.

"I now know what transpired. However—This place is probably the most dangerous, you know? Selected by my friend, you all have dragon marks whose color has changed. If NIFL soldiers, ignorant of the situation, were to discover you, how might they treat you to prevent you from getting targeted by a dragon..."

"No need to worry about that. The dragon marks of everyone here have stopped changing color because we have made contact with Nii-san. Ariella-san is the only one who has yet to touch Nii-san."

After Mitsuki answered on everyone's behalf, Charlotte looked at me in wide-eyed surprise.

"M-My friend... You're amazing. I never expected so many of them were willing to accept the risks and make contact with you..."

I was slightly frightened by her intent starting.

"W-What's wrong...?"

"Nothing. This development is a result of your masculine charm. Although I still haven't discerned anything yet—Hmm, what part exactly is tugging at the heartstrings of the maidens?"

Charlotte leaned forward and examined me up close.

Her blue eyes, as beautiful as a pure fairy's, glimmered with curiosity while her expression changed.

Her breath was blowing on my face, causing my cheeks to grow hot.

"Ch-Charl, you're too close."

"Oh—S-Sorry. Went on a tangent there."

Blushing slightly, Charlotte coughed deliberately.

"Ahem... I now know that you are no longer in danger due to dragon marks changing in color—Is it really okay for them to be here, those who must not be seen by NIFL?"

Charlotte looked at Shion, Jeanne and Vritra.

Although Shion had become human, she was originally a juvenile Kraken managed under an Asgard lab. It would be nothing surprising even if NIFL demanded the extradition of Jeanne, their former member, together with Shion.

Furthermore, it would be nothing surprising to regard the matter of harboring Vritra, currently in a captive state, as a massive act of betrayal against mankind.

I was fully aware of these risks. However—

"There'll be no way to respond in an emergency if we separate the targets requiring protection. It's still better for Shion and the others to be with you, Charl."

"You wish to protect me...?"

Charlotte asked in surprise.

"Since I know you're being targeted, that goes without saying, right?"

Wondering why she was so surprised, I nodded at the same time.

Next, Charlotte sighed deeply and looked at me questioningly.

"Are you—truly sure?"

"Huh?"

I was puzzled by her solemn tone of voice.

"Ariella Lu decided to kill me even at the cost of betraying all of you. Did it occur to you that she might be fully justified?"

"....."

I could not answer immediately. Major Loki had warned me that Charlotte was about to commit a grave sin. She was apparently admitting to this herself.

Hence, I did not think that Charlotte was merely a victim. Even so—even if Charlotte was in the wrong, what I needed to do had not changed.

"They are separate matters."

Without responding directly to Charlotte's question, that was how I answered.

"Separate matters?"

"Right now, Charl, your life is being targeted, so I have to protect you. However—once I know that you're up to something bad, of course I'll do everything I can to stop you. Both are matter-of-fact actions I'd take as a friend. There's no contradiction."

That was what I told Charlotte. I was simply making my own decision from the standpoint of a friend.

Charlotte stared at me blankly for a while before smiling at me.

"Hoo—Indeed, that's the kind of person you are, my friend. It looks like I've failed to recognize that clearly."

Shrugging, she slowly stood up from her seat and raised her hand casually.

Next, ripples appeared on the surface of the pool of blood on the floor. Then the blood turned into spheres like bubbles and hovered in the air.

At the same time, as though getting washed out, the red color was being sucked away from her bloodstained lab coat.

The blood gathered on Charlotte's palm. Smaller red bubbles gathered together, expanding into a large ball of blood.

When all blood had disappeared from the floor and her clothing, a bowling ball-sized sphere of blood was formed in front of Charlotte.

Witnessing this scene, Mitsuki and the girls whispered among themselves behind me.

"This red blood is precisely my authority. Having prepared this, allow me to tell you all what I am about to do."

Following the ball of blood floating in the air, Charlotte opened a window in the office.

Outside was a sparkling starry night and Midgard in darkness.

Although I knew late night was approaching, it still felt subtly reassuring to actually see the scenery outside the window. Having spent some time underground with the sky out of sight, my sense of time had grown ambiguous

"Come to me and take a good look outside."

Charlotte reached out and called us to the window.

The Midgardsormr defense system, currently surfaced, was impossible to distinguish from the horizon due to the darkness. Apart from the illuminated campus, all other places were shrouded under the canopy of the night.

However, there were multiple weak light source in the darkness that kept flashing. Flashing light sources appeared intermittently around the school.

"Muzzle flashes from firearms... Is a battle going on?"

I gasped and asked. In response, Charlotte nodded.

"Currently, the Dragon Subjugation Squad is in charge of generating walls of air and electromagnetic barriers around various Midgard facilities to prevent NIFL's invasion. The fighting over there is taking place outside the barriers."

After Charlotte explained, Mitsuki spoke up frantically.

"The Dragon Subjugation Squad has entered the fray!? In that case, I must take charge of command as the captain—"

"Don't panic. Haruka is in command and the Dragon Subjugation Squad is only deploying barriers without fighting. These kind-hearted girls are unable to attack humans to begin with."

Charlotte smiled wryly while she spoke. However, a burning question began to spread among us.

"Then who is NIFL fighting, may I ask?"

Lisa asked on everyone's behalf. Charlotte stopped smiling and answered in a calm voice.

"*The NIFL soldiers under my control*."

"What...?"

The unexpected answer made Lisa at a loss for words. Meanwhile, Charlotte continued with a grave expression.

"NIFL broke Midgardsormr's final defense line using artillery bombardment. It was afternoon today when they executed a fully armed landing on Midgard. At the the time, I secured Midgard's right to legitimate self-defense by controlling a solider to open fire, thus refusing them entry into the school facilities. And right now, using those under my control to spread the 'infection' of my blood, roughly one third of NIFL's deployed soldiers are under my control. They're the ones currently fighting."

After listening to Charlotte, Kili remarked sarcastically with aloofness.

"Directing and acting out a script of your own to start a battle and even making them slaughter one another, how cruel of you. As expected of the dragon that rules humanity."

"—I know this not behavior befitting a human. Those who fall under my control can obtain temporary immortality, turning them into undefeatable monsters to assault their comrades. This is probably not a sight you guys can accept readily."

Charlotte spoke in self-loathing while peering at the reactions of Mitsuki and the others. Were they imagining the battles taking place in the darkness with flashes of gunfire? Everyone looked a bit timid in expression.

However, Mitsuki took a step forward as though encouraging herself and said:

"To be honest, I have no idea whether what you are doing is correct, Principal. However... We must stall for time until the inspection order is rescinded, just as we initially planned..."

Listening to Mitsuki, Charlotte shrugged slightly.

"Judging from the fact that NIFL damaged Midgardsormr to charge in, they intend to seize evidence of my being 'mankind's enemy' in order to eliminate me. Although, preparations are under way to rescind the order... Those guys are probably not going to pull back. Even if Asgard orders them to withdraw, they won't leave obediently."

"I-In that case, how do you intend to resolve this situation, Principal?"

Mitsuki asked in a panic.

Indeed, if rescinding the order was pointless, then we currently had no means of breaking out of the current predicament.

"This is war between NIFL and me. War will not end until either side has completely subjugated the other. Hence, I intend to put everyone from NIFL under my 'control,' including the fleet along the shore"

Charlotte motioned to the hovering ball of blood with her gaze and answered.

"That's why you need a large volume of blood...?"

Looking at the blood sphere and the hole in the floor where the blood had flowed, I uttered quietly in a hoarse voice.

"Yes. But this is still not enough. In other words, victory in this war depends on whether I can collect enough blood first or if NIFL arrives first. Hnece, it's time for me to start 'collecting blood' again."

Moving away from the window, Charlotte returned to her chair and picked up her knife.

"You're stabbing yourself again...?"

Seeing the knife's sharp glint, Tia asked in a trembling voice.

"loOks pAiNful..."

Shion cowered in fear behind Jeanne's back.

"Oh right—Sorry. This scene is a bit too hardcore for young girls. Those who don't want to watch should enter the inside room. Well.. That is, if you're still not afraid of me after hearing all that just now—"

Charlotte smiled in self-deprecation while looking at everyone to test our response.

Mitsuki and the girls exchanged glances in confusion before all looking in my direction.

"We will leave the decision to Nii-san's judgment. Among us, Nii-san is the one who knows you best, Principal."

Iris, Lisa and the others nodded in agreement. After deliberating in a dilemma for a while, I cautiously chose my words.

"My opinion remains the same. Charl, you just said this is a war between you and NIFL—But to us, it's a battle to save Ariella and protect you, Charl. That's why our best choice is to hide Shion and Jeanne here while the rest of us wait for Ariella."

Mitsuki smiled with satisfaction after I presented my viewpoint.

"—Our policy is thus decided. Well then, Jeanne-san and Shion-san, please enter the inner room first. Oh, Vritra-san, you too, please."

"Understood."

Carrying Shion on her back, Jeanne made her way to Charlotte's private room. Vritra looked at Charlotte as though she had something to say, but in the end, she followed Jeanne without uttering a word.

Having confirmed they had left, Mitsuki coughed and said to us.

"Now then, let us discuss our battle plan. Please do not mind us and feel free to begin your blood collection, Principal."

"W-Wait, you guys—"

Were developments unfolding unexpectedly? Charlotte stood up from her chair in puzzlement.

"Don't forget that I'm the monster that rules over mankind and uses humans as pawns. Disregarding my friend, who's a nice guy to a fault, don't any of you fear me?"

Listening to Charlotte's question, Iris and the others looked troubled. Then hesitating, they said:

"Because... You're the principal, after all."

Iris scratched her cheek and answered.

"It doesn't feel real even if I called you scary right now."

Firill replied with head tilted.

"Judging from the way you act normally, you are not someone who engages in abject villainy."

After Lisa shrugged wryly, Tia nodded in agreement.

"Tia doesn't think the principal is a bad person!"

Next, Ren concurred in a feeble voice:

"But... She apparently steals underwear."

"Well, that is as far as the worst goes."

Mitsuki added a comment that sounded quite mean.

Leaving her opinion to the end, Kili shrugged with indifference.

"Having become Yuu's mate, I am now Neun, right? There's no reason for me to fear Acht."

Neun was a reference to the ninth counterdragon that had come into existence to resist a monumental calamity. I had heard that from Tia and Vritra. The "Gray" Vampire was the counterdragon born to handle the eighth calamity, "humanity," which was why Kili was calling her Acht, or the eighth.

However, there was still no concrete evidence to prove that I was Neun—

"So this is the result of my everyday behavior huh..."

Listening to everyone, Charlotte sighed in disappointment.

"Indeed. No need to worry, we'll protect you."

Smiling wryly, I patted Charlotte on the shoulder.

"—Understood. Since you've said this much already, I will count on all of you."

Apparently freed from many mental impasses, Charlotte smiled cheerfully at us.

"Currently, NIFL has dispatched unmanned weaponry, which I cannot control. It's possible they may include units equipped with the power to break through the Dragon Subjugation Squad's barriers. Top priority must be given to preventing underground invasions, but surface defenses also need to be bolstered."

Hearing her request, Tia immediately raised her hand energetically.

"If it's machines, Tia will hack them all!"

Having seen how Tia had handled the partitions earlier, we nodded. Left to Tia, the unmanned weaponry would probably all become neutralized in a moment's time.

At this moment, Mitsuki suddenly posed a question to Tia as though it had suddenly occurred to her.

"Perhaps—in addition to the unmanned weaponry, are you able to hack the fleet surrounding Midgard?"

If that were possible, NIFL could be controlled even without Charlotte exercising her authority.

However, Tia shook her head sadly.

"Tia can only affect nearby objects using electrical interference. There is a method to increase the interference range, but..."

Tia explained in a quandary.

Speaking of which, Yggdrasil's interference range was also limited. It had expanded its interference range by extending the branches from its trunk—

"And the method is...?"

Head tilted, Firill urged Tia to continue.

"Moving Yggdrasil's CPU into a tree on Midgard and letting it grow big. That'll enable long-distance interference. But it's very time consuming and will surely cause a large commotion."

Tia frowned and explained the reason.

"That's true... If the same kind of absurd tree appeared here as in Japan, it'll undoubtedly cause misunderstandings."

Even if it could suppress NIFL for now, the world would seal away Midgard because of Yggdrasil's revival.

"Also, it'll definitely block off sunlight. I like my hair to dry naturally without using blow dryers, so it'll be a bit of a nuisance."

Iris' worries were quite off the mark.

"I could help you out if the shade causes temperatures to drop—No wait, Iris-san, now is not the appropriate time to discuss this matter, is it?"

Lisa shrugged in exasperation.

"Wow... A tsukkomi retort. Your studying of Japanese culture for Mononobe-kun's sake is bearing fruit."

Firill praised Lisa with a thumbs-up. Blushing, Lisa waved her hands.

"No... That was just unintentional—Listen here, Mononobe Yuu! Firill-san was just joking, so do not take her seriously!"

"O-Okay."

Overwhelmed by Lisa's forceful stares, I nodded.

"Off topic."

Ren reminded quietly, prompting Lisa to cough in embarrassment.

"...Goodness gracious. My apologies for being in a bit of fluster. Summing up, expanding Tia-san's interference range would be very difficult. In that case, we will have to allow the unmanned weaponry to come close."

Forcibly returning to the subject, Lisa looked at Tia in worry. Understanding Lisa's concerns, Mitsuki nodded.

"In terms of safety considerations, Tia-san must exit the barriers in order to approach the unmanned weaponry. In that case, she will be vulnerable and we will need an extra bodyguard"

"Leave this task to me then."

Lisa volunteered to be Tia's bodyguard without any hesitation at all

"Tia is very reassured to have Lisa coming!"

Tia bounced up and down happily, but suddenly, her expression changed. I stared at her in doubt.

"Oh, but... Since you have to fight Ariella, it's better for Tia to stay with Yuu."

"Oh right—If you're there, Tia, you can obstruct Ariella's use of transmutation."

Holding my hand against the corner of my mouth, I pondered.

Tia was able to hack more than machines. Since human thoughts were transmitted using electrical signals too, she was capable of interfering in dark matter, whose generation was a product of mental resonance.

Naturally, as with machinery, there was a limit to interference range., but in an unavoidable battle against Ariella, having Tia on my side would be very advantageous.

While I was deliberating over what to do, Charlotte spoke up.

"It will take more time until NIFL reaches here from underground. Why not take as much control of the unmanned weaponry on the ground as possible first then go underground to intercept them?"

Hearing Charlotte's suggestion, Mitsuki nodded firmly.

"Indeed, that would be better. However, defenses on the ground surface must not weaken during underground transit. Who will fill the gap in defenses on the ground to take Tia's place after she departs?"

Mitsuki asked while looking at us. Next, Firill raised her dainty hand.

"Leave it to me. After all, Ariella and I were always in charge of defense."

While saying Ariella's name, Firill looked at me.

"...Mononobe-kun, I leave Ariella in your hands."

"Yes, don't worry."

I nodded solemnly at Firill.

"In that case, there will no issue on the surface... I shall take take command as the captain of the Dragon Subjugation Squad as well..."

Mitsuki murmured while glancing at me sideways with blinking eyes. Seeing her like that, Lisa sighed lightly.

"Mitsuki-san, if you are worried about Mononobe Yuu, why not go along with him? The principal has handed command of the Dragon Subjugation Squad to Shinomiya-sensei, so our side will be fine."

"I, umm, well..."

Mitsuki frantically shifted her gaze back and forth between Lisa and me, then lowered her head shyly.

"...Very well, it is decided. Thank you, Lisa-san."

Mitsuki answered in a feeble voice.

"Yes. Do your best too. Well then, Tia-san and Firill-san, let us depart."

Calling the two girls, Lisa opened the window in the principal's office and walked into the balcony.

"Good luck, everyone!"

Iris waved to them. After nodding back at her, Lisa's group flew into the night sky.

After they disappeared into the darkness, Charlotte turned to look at us.

"The situation underground is under close monitoring in the command center. They will contact us as soon as NIFL trespasses into dangerous territory. Until then, you should rest in that room there and not move around for no reason."

Charlotte pointed at the room where Jeanne and the others had entered

Just as Charlotte pointed out, there was no way to decide where we should wait on standby until NIFL's invasion route was confirmed. Ariella would probably be the first to reach the clock tower. Thinking that, I replied affirmatively to Charlotte.

"—Got it. However, I've something to talk with you about, Charl."

"Something to talk about?"

Looking straight at Charlotte, who was tilting her head in surprise, I nodded firmly.

Part 3

The sound of dripping blood returned to the quiet principal's office again.

With a knife stabbed in her belly, Charlotte looked up at the ceiling with a pale demeanor.

Her expression would twist in pain from time to time. Watching this, I felt very worried.

"There must be a better way to take out blood than this, right..?"

"...No, this is the most suitable."

Widening her eyes slightly, she showed a grin surfacing on the corners of her lips.

Only Charlotte and I were present in the principal's office. Everyone else had gone to the other room for a nap.

"But... when you stab that spot, it's very painful yet the bleeding is not that much, right?"

"If I bleed out too much, I'll still lose consciousness even though I won't die. Controlling multiple targets means I have to maintain concentration. The pain is also a necessary means towards staying conscious."

Charlotte answered with weariness on her face.

At this time, I finally noticed that she had already pushed herself too far. Her painful expressions reflected not only pain but also the accumulated fatigue she was enduring.

"What happens if you lose consciousness? Will the controlled targets be released?"

"No, so you don't need to worry about that. However, they might very well get killed by their opponents. If I don't give detailed commands, cases of death on my side might result."

Charlotte answered me indifferently.

"Killed? But didn't you say the people under your control are immortal...?"

"That's only a limited form. If they lose their head or a large part of their body, it's impossible to regenerate."

Listening to this, I understood why Charlotte was bearing all this pain.

"...You don't want anyone to die, Charl."

"I'll make myself clear. This is not out of mercy. I just find it's a pain to handle the aftermath of deaths. My friend—Is this really okay? You definitely won't approve of my actions."

Charlotte emphasized her point. Rather than putting on a front, it was a serious question.

Hearing her, bathed in her gaze, I sighed lightly.

"You don't want to be approved... In other words, what you're doing now, Charl—what you're going to do—isn't something you wish to do."

"...Well—"

Charlotte seemed inclined to argue back, but halfway through, she avoided eye contact and stopped.

Seeing her like that, I mustered my determination and brought up the main topic.

"My former superior officer—Major Loki at NIFL—said that you intend to commit a grave sin and deprive many people of their lives. Ariella also said she had a reason to kill you Charl... What on earth are you planning to do?"

After I inquired, Charlotte clenched her fist as though trying to endure something.

While she remained silent, I continued to ask from a different approach.

"An old dressing table in the underground cottage—It's yours, right? I saw the photo in the drawer."

".....Oh. It was taken with me and my father in the past."

After a while, Charlotte nodded lightly.

"So it really was your father, huh? To be frank, he looks very similar to the Major Loki I just mentioned."

I cautiously chose my words. Charlotte smiled wryly.

"...I know. I also jumped in surprise when I saw him visiting during the school festival. Although I've known of his existence long ago, I never expected such an uncanny resemblance. Seriously... Bloodlines are such unbelievable things."

"Bloodlines? In other words, Charl, you and Major Loki are—"

While thinking just as suspected, I gazed at Charl.

"That's right, we're blood relatives. That being said, it's the level of blood tie where one could consider each other strangers."

"...Can you explain in detail?"

Now was the only opportunity to step into her world. I insisted strongly.

Charlotte's gaze wandered a bit in hesitation but in the end, she gave up and said:

"A couple centuries ago, there lived a pair of twin brothers. They both obtained power simultaneously. At the same time, they also understood that this was an authority that had manifested to protect the world from humanity's hands."

"...Twins?"

After I muttered quietly, Charlotte made a slight nod.

"Indeed. The younger of the twins was my father—Leonardo B. Lord. To prevent humans from destroying the world, he had received the power to control and manage humanity. As for the elder brother, he had apparently obtained the power to eliminate humanity off the face of the earth."

"What...?"

Having developed civilization, humanity was regarded as the eighth calamity—the eighth dragon. Tia and Vritra had already informed me of this.

The eighth counterdragon born to oppose the calamity was the gray dragon—the "Gray" Vampire.

However, according to Charlotte, the world apparently gave birth to two counterdragons at the same time.

Vritra had said that after so much time had passed, humanity was already regarded as a part of the world and hence did not get eliminated. But perhaps... The part of the world recognizing mankind as an external threat still remained.

Due to a division in the world's will, were two authorities, identical in ends yet diametrically opposed in means, produced...?

Charlotte looked at me in my puzzlement and continued.

"However, the older brother left the responsibility of protecting the world to Leonardo—my father—and apparently did not use his authority even once in his life. My father named this unchosen power the scrapped authority, Code Lost."

—The scrapped authority. The unused power of the eighth.

Words I had heard during the previous battle against Vritra suddenly flashed through my mind.

'Mayhap 'tis the scrapped eighth—'

She had definitely said something similar. And when telling me about the eighth authority, she had been holding back.

Vritra probably knew about the duality of the eighth authority.

"When the eighth authority awakened, my father stopped aging and became immune to disease. In this manner, he lived for centuries. Undoubtedly, this was for the purpose of continued control over

humans. Rather than the true nature of the power, immortality and eternal youth were likely the effects of the body adjusting itself to the ability."

Charlotte placed her hand on me as she spoke.

Transformation of the body as a result of obtaining power—this had happened to Iris recently. To accommodate power, the body of flesh evolved to become a different lifeform. Surely, Leviathan and Hraesvelgr must have gained their powerful appearances due to that.

"Due to eternal life and youth, my father always lived in solitude. However, perhaps his mind grew weary? ...He finally got married ten years before the first dragon disaster and had a child. And I am the child who was born. This was his first child in his long life spanning centuries—Hence, I grew up showered with love and doting. But on the day of my thirteenth birthday, a certain incident happened."

Charlotte gritted her teeth while holding back pain. However, it looked even more painful than stabbing a knife into her own body. Such was the torment she felt from recalling the past in her memory.

"My father had been traveling all over the place in his efforts to establish Asgard, but he came home to celebrate my birthday. However, due to one man showing up, dozens of guards... my mother... and father were all murdered."

Charlotte's father, supposed to be immortal and eternally young, murdered—Despite noticing this inherent contradiction, I refrained from raising this question in front of her sorrowful demeanor.

I took Charlotte's hand, clenched tightly in a fist, and held it, waiting for her to calm down. Her hand felt exceptionally cold because of her current bleeding.

"Hoo... You're so kind. Back when the tragedy struck, Mica was also holding my hand like this in the underground shelter."

Charlotte recounted nostalgically and placed her other hand on top of my hand.

"Mica-san?"

"Yes, Mica-san was originally my father's vassal. From the day I was born, she has always stayed by my side, in charge of my education and protection. On that day, Mica and I were the only two survivors. Locked in a posture of mutual stabbing, that man and my father drew their last breath... I did not witness what had actually happened."

Charlotte took a deep breath to calm herself before continuing with a solemn expression.

"Although I had no idea back then, all the guards were semi-immortals who had entered into blood pacts with my father. And my father was genuinely immortal in every sense of the word. Yet despite that, everyone died. Unable to understand what had happened, all I could do was cry and wail."

Charlotte spoke in self-deprecation. However, that was only to be expected for a thirteen-year-old girl to be confronted with that kind of situation.

"I can recall clearly what happened after that. I shut myself indoors and left everything for Mica to handle. But one day, I witnessed my own wound healing instantly. It was when Mica explained this that I learned about my father's power for the first time."

Looking at our overlapping hands, Charlotte recounted nostalgically.

"I knew I had inherited my father's authority... Starting then, I finally resolved myself to stand on the stage. The day I found out the truth was when I succeeded my father's legacy genuinely and founded Asgard."

"The truth..."

I repeated the word, prompting Charlotte to nod lightly.

"My father's killer belonged to the older brother's bloodline. He was apparently a soldier who had extraordinarily distinguished himself in battle due to United Nations forces intervening in civil war zones. Perhaps he had inherited the power for killing humans... The supposedly scrapped authority of Code Lost."

Was it due to a lack of concrete evidence? Charlotte spoke ambiguously.

However, since the man had killed people who were supposed to be immortal, this possibility was quite likely.

"And that man had been sent by a faction composed of people who felt that my father's control was a bad thing. These people established an independent military organization—NIFL—before my rule could touch them. I had already exhausted myself in taking control of Asgard. When I found out those people were revering my father's killer as a hero, I was so angry that I wanted to cook them alive."

Charlotte gritted her teeth hard with eyes burning in rage.

"So Charl, NIFL was hostile against you from the start huh..."

"Indeed. One could say that the current situation was inevitable."

Charlotte looked out the window, narrowing her eyes at the light of battle, then continued.

"Your former boss—Loki Jotunheim... is known as the 'son of the hero.'"

"..."

Although I was able to guess that from the assassin's bloodline, the weight from the revelation of Charlotte and Major Loki's relationship still forced my body to tremble.

"Although he had changed his family records, there can be no doubt. NIFL probably hopes for him to become the second-generation hero."

"Second-generation hero..."

Naturally, this was referring to the murder of Charlotte—

"—My friend, are you angry?"

Charlotte looked troubled as she looked at me gritting my teeth and asked.

"Of course I am."

"Although your feelings fill me with gratitude... Please note that what you just heard was the story from my perspective. The people who had my father murdered believe they are the side of justice. If you listen to their version... You'd think their actions were legitimate too. My father and I are enemies of humanity."

Charlotte made the same expression as when she had said "You definitely won't approve of my actions" earlier. But to be frank, I could not accept her words.

"You and your father are described as enemies of humanity, Charl?"

"—What my father and I used our authority to maintain was world stability. In order to stop this weapon from causing a dramatic change to the planet's environment, I've kept intervention to a minimum level."

I frowned after listening to Charlotte's answer.

"I don't think that's a bad thing..."

My words brought a wry smile on Charlotte's face. She shook her head.

"There's no one who wouldn't find excessive meddling annoying. Previously, it was fine for me to limit my interference to countries armed with nuclear weapons, but with the current state of affairs, dangerous weapons developed in the name of fighting dragons have even spread to smaller nations. Consequently, large-scale control needs to be imposed in order to bring stability back to the world that has lost balance due to the disappearance of dragons, even to the point of suppressing civil wars in minor nations."

"But... maintaining world peace is the proper thing to do, right?"

I continued to argue, prompting Charlotte to speak in annoyance. Before she answered, she pursed her lips tightly.

"...Think on your own what part of my actions is evil. Or perhaps, you could ask Ariella Lu and the son of the hero directly."

Charlotte suddenly released my hand and replied.

"Charl?"

I did not know why she refused to answer, so I called her name. Then she looked up at the ceiling with a smile of self-deprecation.

"I am a coward. I don't want to say words, which might cause my friend to leave me, directly with my own mouth. Although I said you definitely won't approve of what I'm doing, I actually do hope for you to be my ally. That's why... although I find this very unfair, I won't continue to give you information that could make you hate me."

Charlotte cut me off forcefully and guiltily avoided eye contact.

For sure, she had said everything she could. Understanding that, I bowed me head at her.

"—Got it. I'll figure out the rest on my own. Thank you for telling me all this."

I thanked her then leaned on the table and looked out the window.

After watching the starry sky for a while, Charlotte said in surprise.

"We're done chatting, you know? You should take a nap for a while like the girls."

"No, I'll stay here. You need someone to talk to you and distract you from the pain."

I looked out the window and replied calmly.

Charlotte inhaled and said in exasperation.

"—What a meddlesome fellow."

"That's what they often say about me."

"In that case—Could you meddle a bit more... Umm, pat me on the head, please."

After some hesitation, Charlotte said with a blush.

"Pat you on the head?"

"...That would probably help me forget the pain."

"Sure, I'm on it."

I nodded and placed my hand on Charlotte's head.

"Your hand is so big."

"Really? I find it very normal—"

I inclined my head while patting her sleek blonde hair.

"Your patting feels great. My father doted on me too much. His way was more stiff."

Hearing that, I realized why she had made such a request.

While Charlotte closed her eyes partially in pleasure, the side of her face looked even younger than usual. She was probably remembering her father.

Then what I ought to say to her now was—

"You are so admirable, Charlotte."

"...Huh, why so suddenly?"

Charlotte looked up at me in surprise.

"Nothing much, I just think you need more praise, Charl. Although you're always making Mica-san mad all the time, you're actually working really hard."

Good work. Just as I finished patting Charlotte on the head, she pouted shyly.

"...I-It is only natural as the principal. There's no need for special praise."

"Well, that might be true for adults—But right now, Charl, you're like a child."

"Wha... H-How rude. E-Enough with this patting."

Going red in the face, Charlotte tried to get my hand off but I continued to pat her head.

"Sorry, I won't say unnecessary things anymore."

I used my fingers to gently comb through her hair. Charlotte's resistance slowly weakened and she sighed.

"Seriously... Aren't you making me more and more fearful of getting hated by you?"

She whispered in distraught but with a smile hanging on her face.

Pururururu.

However, this peaceful atmosphere in the room was suddenly broken by a shrill alert.

The phone on the work desk rang.

"...Faster than expected."

Charlotte's expression tensed as she picked up the receiver stiffly.

"———————I understand."

After responding to the caller, she looked at me.

"We have company."

"Understood. I'll go call everyone."

I nodded and walked to the door leading to Charlotte's private room.

"—By the way, I've something else to tell you."

Just as I gripped the handle and was about to open the door, I heard Charlotte's voice from behind.

It must be something important if she was bringing it up in this situation. I turned towards her.

Looking at me seriously, she said:

"Recorded in the materials my father left behind is the name of a dragon unknown to me."

"The name of an unknown dragon?"

I repeated what she said as a question. Charlotte nodded firmly and said:

"I fear it probably refers to my father's older brother who possessed the scrapped authority of Code Lost..."

A chill suddenly ran along my back. Before I heard her, my hairs were already standing on end due to certainty in a premonition of what she would say.

"The clear dragon—'Colorless' Fafnir. This is the name of the dragon born for the sake of killing mankind."

Chapter 2 - Aegis' Blitzkrieg

Part 1

BOOM!!

An explosion was heard in the underground passage, shaking the entire space.

"Generate squall."

Ariella Lu created air by transmuting dark matter from her gauntlet of a fictional armament, blowing away all the dark smoke around her.

When the view turned clear, what appeared before her eyes was a partition with a large hole in it. How many partitions had she destroyed already? Since she had not bothered to take note, trying to count by memory now would be a pain.

She passed through the remains of the partition with seven young soldiers following her silently. There was no need to give them orders. They—the special forces team Sleipnir—were equivalent to Ariella's limbs.

While Ariella looked at these expressionless followers, a man's voice suddenly spoke through the communicator on her ear.

'—Ah, looks like things are going smoothly.'

"Who are you?"

Ariella asked while continuing to advance. Mild laughter was heard from the other side.

'Didn't you hear from Captain Shelley? I am the commander of the unit you have now joined.'

Hearing the name of someone who was a leader in her former organization, Ariella sighed.

"I see—So you're that Major Loki Jotunheim?"

'Indeed. At the same time, I am also responsible for supervising the deal you made with her. Even if she betrays the promise, I won't allow it to happen. Everything you do must be rewarded.'

"...Why thank you very much."

After Ariella responded to this speech of feigned sincerity, Loki said wryly:

"Looks like I'm distrusted."

"That's besides the point—;I simply don't care about that kind of stuff at all. Of course, I hope your side will hold up your end of the bargain, but... I too have reasons for why I must kill the principal."

'Now that's what I call reliable. Since you have chosen to oppose "Gray" on your own accord, we are comrades in a sense. Although you distrust me, I still wish you victory sincerely from the bottom of my heart.'

The voice changed subtly. He was was speaking in a sincere tone.

However, Ariella frowned with displeasure.

"So is this how you curried Mononobe-kun's favor?"

'...Curried favor? I don't think I understand you.'

"Really? Did I say anything wrong? Isn't it currying favor when a weakling tries to exploit the strong by resorting to desperate little tricks?"

'Hmph...'

Loki chuckled in response to Ariella's overt disdain.

"You're probably very good at making other people act according to your wishes. However, I can tell. I can tell just from your voice—You are very weak."

'I am very weak—Am I? Really...? So that's what you think.'

Loki spoke in delight. Whether this was feigned casualness or sarcasm against a wrong observaton—Ariella did not know.

But from Ariella's perspective, this sort of thing did not matter either. What she wanted to say was one thing only.

"You're definitely someone *extremely powerless*. Wanting to be my ally when you're clearly unable to do anything? Know some shame. That's why—Shut up when I'm fighting."

Declaring that to Loki unilaterally, Ariella tossed the communicator away without listening to his reply.

She had put it on tentatively in the beginning because the communicator had been passed to her, but Ariella felt thoroughly disgusted the instant it occurred to her that she was currently linked to that man through airwaves.

—Still, am I acting too immature here?

Since the other side had guaranteed the completion of the transaction, she ought to exploit him fully while concealing her true thoughts.

Why didn't I do that? Ariella immediately found the reason as soon as she gave it some thought.

—That man had exploited Mononobe-kun. As soon as it crossed her mind, she found it unbearable.

Perhaps this sort of emotion was quite similar to jealousy in a certain sense. Ariella began to smile wryly.

In her current state, there was no way she could fight when facing him.

Although she had asked him not to chase after her, she was certain he would not give up. Using the power of Hraesvelgr, the dragon she loathed to the extreme, he had conveyed his thoughts to her.

Hence, he was surely waiting ahead of her.

Ariella stopped and extended her hand behind her. Next, a member of Sleipnir approached Ariella silently and handed a red capsule to her.

Inside the capsule was blood. She had checked in the beginning by biting it open with her teeth before swallowing it.

Ariella did not know whose blood it was.

However, her mind had become shrouded in white mist after she swallowed the capsule. She could sense her thoughts turning sluggish. And possibly because of that, her senses gained unprecedented clarity. Unarticulated murderous intent stirred her from within.

A "certain something" lurking deep in the abyss of her consciousness, which she had suppressed by shaping her fictional armament into defensive gear and refusing to hold a weapon, was writhing restlessly.

Swallowing another capsule would probably stop her completely from thinking unnecessary things.

With that, she would become the same as those young soldiers, silently following her, whose nature had been transformed into a system for combat—No, for murder.

Although it was a bit unscrupulous to rely on this kind of thing, she decided it was something essential to stop her current self from halting in her steps.

By this point, she must not stop. Unless she did everything within her power... It would be unacceptable. Hence—

Ariella placed the capsule in her mouth and swallowed. In that instant, Ren's face flashed across her mind.

If Ren was waiting ahead, Ariella might harm her after losing her sense of self. Ariella was very afraid of this. More afraid of this than anything.

—However, Mononobe-kun would protect Ren properly.

Embracing a wish contrary to her own objective—Ariella surrendered herself to the surging murderous intent.

Part 2

"Ariella-chan is about to arrive."

Looking at the partition that blocked the passage, Iris said nervously.

"That's right—our opponent seems to be a high-speed assault unit. Although their specific identities can't be confirmed due to destruction of security cameras... It should be Ariella."

I explained what I had heard from Charlotte and added my own hunch while sweeping my gaze across the surroundings.

This was an underground passage near the surface. It was relatively wide with higher ceilings due to being used as a transportation passage for moving goods and materials. Although it looked like large weapons could also pass through, it was unlikely that the unmanned weaponry and NIFL soldiers could arrive faster than Ariella.

Currently, NIFL was stuck with infighting. The foot soldiers were being blocked and attacked by people under Charlotte's control while the unmanned weapons were getting hacked one after another by Tia and used to obstruct other unmanned weapons.

Due to comparable numbers on both sides, it was currently a stalemate. However, there was no one in those NIFL units who could oppose the Ds, who each individually wielded firepower on the level of large weapons. As a result, the first to arrive ought to be Ariella.

"Mm..."

Beside me, Ren gripped my shirt tightly.

She looked quite nervous but there was no uncertainty in her eyes. Ren's face conveyed the determination to rescue Ariella. She was staring at the partition.

"It'll be fine for sure! Tia is here!"

Tia encouraged us.

Even capable of hacking dark matter, Tia was honestly very reliable. Perhaps the ground defense situation might get tougher due to Tia's

withdrawal, but Lisa and Firill had stayed behind to maintain barriers with their full effort.

"—Mm."

Ren's expression relaxed slightly as she nodded lightly in gratitude.

"If Ariella-san is bringing many NIFL soldiers... What shall we do?"

Mitsuki had already summoned her fictional armament of a bow when she asked me the question. Judging from her demeanor, her body temperature was still raised but she sounded very energetic.

"An increase of numbers would result in loss of marching speed. Judging from their invasion speed, a small team is more than likely. Well, it's possible for unmanned weapons to be following them, but that should pose no threat."

Listening to me, Kili nodded calmly.

"That's right, Tia can hack them. Rather, it would only serve to increase our numbers. Ordinary soldiers can't do anything once we envelop them in wind. It makes no difference no matter how many of them come."

Although Kili's reply was confident as usual, there was something slightly different.

"....."

She frowned in surprise when I stared at her in amazement.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I'm just a bit surprised you're thinking of neutralizing instead of killing them."

Normally, the pattern would be her saying "just incinerate them" and me trying to stop her.

"...I'm just playing along with your methods. Unnecessary arguments are a pain."

Kili averted eye contact with some displeasure then Iris suddenly looked at us.

"Mononobe, don't speak like that! Kili-chan is being considerate for us, so we should thank her!"

"Oh right... That's true. Thank you, Kili."

Scolded by Iris, I thanked Kili.

"Huh? Hmm, well... It's nothing—By the way, Iris-chan, don't make unnecessary comments, you're throwing me off balance..."

Kili wavered in a rare moment. To regain control, she took a deep breath forcefully.

The ones present here were me, Ren, Iris, Mitsuki, Kili and Tia, the six of us. Lisa and Firill on the ground to bolster defenses. Jeanne, Shion and Vritra were staying in Charlotte's room.

"Putting all that aside—How do you lot intend to stop Ariella Lu? We should discuss the battle plan properly now, right?"

Hearing Kili's question, I looked at Mitsuki, who then nodded lightly.

She seemed to be leaving the matter to me. Although I had already pondered the issue, I asked Tia a question first before sharing my thoughts.

"—Tia, how wide a range can you interfere with dark matter?"

"Around ten meters, but for short periods, Tia can expand the interference range by generating electricity."

After listening to Tia's answer, I crossed my arms and said:

"Ten meters—even if it could be extended, this distance isn't very reassuring. Before we find out enemy numbers and how they're equipped, you should stay in the back on standby. Once the partition is destroyed, I'll go over first to draw attention and engage Ariella."

"Yes!"

Tia nodded and accepted my instructions. However, Ren looked up worriedly from beside me.

"Onii-chan..."

"Don't worry. I won't get taken out so easily. This battle's purpose is to save Ariella. Also... If the promise still holds, all I need to do is touch Ariella once."

To ease Ren, I stroked her head gently while I answered.

If I were to touch Ariella, she would "transform into my kind." Ariella had told me to try turning her into my mate if I wanted to stop her.

"Then Mononobe, what about me? I'm willing to do anything for Ariella-chan!"

Listening to our dialogue, Iris asked, fully motivated.

"Iris, you'll stay on standby next to Tia and use explosions to pin down approaching enemies. No need to hit them directly. Just use the wind from the blast to stop them from getting close."

"Yes, I got it!"

Iris answered energetically. Next, I issued instructions to the others successively.

"Mitsuki, you'll be in charge of guarding Tia and Iris. If things go south for me, take Tia and Iris and move them to bring Ariella into interference range. But depending on the situation, you might need to keep a barrier deployed—"

"Understood. Leave Tia-san and Iris-san to me."

Mitsuki accepted my orders with a tense expression.

"Kili, you'll head to the front with me. I'm leaving everyone apart from Ariella to you. Just as you said earlier, just neutralize them without killing anyone."

"...Sure, I'll try."

Was she displeased about what I brought up earlier? Kili nodded with a mixed expression. Finally, I looked at Ren.

"Ren, you'll be in charge of the middle guard. Prioritize your own safety while supporting Kili and me. Also, if possible, I hope you can try calling out to Ariella."

"Mm!"

Ren released my shirt and left me. With a determined expression, she nodded.

—Znnnnnnnn...

At this moment, a deep rumbling noise was heard coming from the front.

"...Seems like they're approaching. Keep away from the partition and prepare to fight, everyone."

Giving these orders, I backed away together with everyone.

As the vanguard, Kili and I stopped a couple meters away from the partition. In charge of support as the middle guard, Ren retreated slightly farther back. The trio of Tia, Iris and Mitsuki backed away the farthest with their fictional armaments ready. The spot where Kili and I were standing was precisely the limit of Tia's interference range.

The low rumbling was heard again.

It sounded nearer than before. One by one, the partitions were being destroyed.

"Finally a chance to fight alongside you. Although our first shared endeavor was supposed to have been completed last night... Oh well, this is more like our style."

Kili tossed her long black hair and smiled with satisfaction.

But as soon I thought back to the previous night's nocturnal visit, blood rushed directly to my face.

"—Quit making weird comments before a battle. Also... Give me a break on that kind of stuff."

While whispering quietly, I glanced secretly at Iris and Mitsuki to see if they had heard.

"No. I said we're continuing next time, didn't I? Also, you've heard about Neun from Mother and Tia, right?"

After refusing to comply, Kili asked solemnly.

Indeed, I had heard about authorities, counterdragons and calamities from Tia and Vritra. Kili probably knew some of it from Vritra too.

"That's right—But Vritra insists I'm not Neun."

Neun was the newest counterdragon born from the world to resist the inevitable coming of the ninth calamity—the ninth dragon. However, it would be quite strange if I had become Neun without encountering the calamity already. That was what Vritra said. Furthermore, since the ninth calamity was apparently the "true form" of the seventh calamity, the chances of an authority arising to counter it were quite low to begin with.

"Mother is too pessimistic. Oh well, it can't be helped since she witnessed the world's destruction once. But we're not obliged to listen to her. Stop thinking too much and just make babies happily with me."

"M-Making babies, you..."

My face instantly turned boiling hot as a result of Kili's direct proposal.

"Oh my, what's the problem? If we have babies, it'll increase the number of antibodies for countering the ninth calamity. Isn't this necessary for the sake of all life on the planet?"

"Uh..."

My mind was unable to keep up with this kind of big reasoning, but a that moment, a third impact was heard.

"L-Let's talk about this some other time. That shaking just now—I'm guessing the nearest partition has been destroyed. Kili, can you deploy barriers to prepare against the partition exploding?"

I changed the subject forcibly. Kili sighed lightly and nodded.

"—Then we'll continue the discussion in your bedroom."

Smiling, Kili said something disturbing before raising her hand.

Wind brushed against my cheeks while the surrounding temperature increased. Although invisible, tiny particles of dark matter must have been generated by Kili in the surroundings. This was her prided skill of "Muspelheim." By spreading dark matter within an area, she was able to perform transmutation instantly without any warning motions for opponents to notice.

"Construction of dual barriers of heat and wind complete. Although this can block the explosion's wake, remember to give me a signal when you're charging into enemy ranks. You'll be burned to death if you touch the heat barrier."

"Yeah, I got it."

I nodded and focused my awareness on the other side of the partition. Although the thick and heavy wall blocked the majority of information, I still felt myself breaking out in goosebumps.

Sharp murderous intent, akin to a knife against one's throat, was approaching step by step.

Kili also seemed to sense the same thing as I did. The smile vanished from her face.

"Since it seems like it'll be more dangerous than I imagined, I'll give you a warning. Don't count on my biogenic transmutation too much."

Kili said in a stiff voice. When I looked at her questioningly, she made a light shrug.

"Although my biogenic transmutation can heal wounds, my own body is the only thing I can restore perfectly. When applied to other people, the most I can do is 'overwrite' the wound."

"Like deleting an injury?"

"When repairing major damage—like restoring entire limbs or organs—will usually result in rejection. I don't have any way of recreating someone else's body correctly."

Kili answered then glanced at Iris and the girls behind her.

"That's why you must protect Iris-chan and the others properly if anything happens. You can't go for mutual destruction yourself either."

Listening to her warning, I smiled subtly.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Hmm, I couldn't help it when I realized you're worrying about Iris and the others."

"What... I'm not—"

Seeing Kili in a fluster, I smiled and thanked her.

"Thank you, Kili. But don't do anything reckless either, Kili. Even if you can heal wounds, it's over if you die directly."

"...I know that. But it's true that I don't die easily. If I cover you—"

Kili replied slightly displeased, but stopped mid-sentence.

With bated breath, she was staring at a black sphere that had appeared ahead.

It was dark matter that every D could generate.

However, I had not summoned it. Judging from the look on her face, Kili had not summoned it either.

Then was this summoned by Iris or the others behind us, or was it—

I could not help but feel my hair standing on end. The partition was intact. The invading party was still on the other side.

However, they had Ariella on their side. If she had noticed our presence on the opposite side of the partition and generated dark matter, guided by intuition—

Also, this dark matter happened to be just outside of Tia's interference range.

"Kili!"

"Don't!!"

I reached out to protect Kili but my hand was redirected and my entire body was shoved away.

Just as I was pushed to the ground, the dark matter gave off blinding light.

—BOOM!!

Flames spread from the explosion. Kili was swallowed by them.

At the same time, a strange noise was produced at the partition. Was it because Kili's barriers had vanished? The flames and the partition's remains rushed over unimpeded. There was no time even to stand up.

Fictional armament—Siegfried.

I summoned the ornamental gun of a fictional armament into my left hand, aiming the muzzle at the flames and debris. However, I heard Ren's voice just before I performed transmutation.

"Onii-chan!!"

The air she generated formed a violent storm rushing over my head.

The storm blocked the flame and debris flying at me, causing a scattering of black smoke.

Several shimmering silhouettes appeared on the other side of the smoke. Seeing them, I instantly got up and charged.

"Ren, take Kili and back away!"

I had no time to check on Kili's condition after she was swallowed by the explosion. I could only pray for her survival and leave things to Ren while charging into the thick smoke.

This attack was probably Ariella's. I closed in. Unless I kept Ariella occupied, there would be no way to buy time for Kili to retreat to the back.

I cleared my mind and gathered as much information from the five senses as possible.

Shimmering silhouettes amidst the smoke. Sound of footsteps. The smell of gunpowder, drifting in the air. The motion of air brushing against my skin.

The number of enemies—Eight of them. No sound of driven machinery or the scent of exhaust gases. In that case, all of them were human.

Despite the poor visibility, it was not difficult to get a grasp on the numbers and positions of my opponents.

As long as I seized initiative, I could handle this number of enemies single-handedly.

Anti-personnel weapon—AT Nergal.

Using transmutation, I created a projectile-based stun gun in my empty right hand. Aiming at the eight presences, I fired consecutively.

Ariella might be able to dodge, but the remaining seven should be neutralized.

Just as I was thinking that, I heard the sound of deflected electricity. There were also several overlapping instances of high-pitched metallic ringing.

This sound—I had heard it before. During my fight against Ariella underground earlier, the same sound had resulted when she threw her knife to block Nergal's bullet.

And right now, this sound was coming from *eight directions simultaneously*.

"—"

Instinctively sensing danger, I immediately jumped from where I was standing. Silver knives stabbed my former location.

A total of eight. In other words, every single one of Nergal's targets had deflected the bullet and counterattacked.

Although my plan was to find out which one of them was Ariella, it did not work. All I could confirm was that all eight were extraordinary opponents.

To be able to deflect bullets in such poor visibility conditions, their skills and instincts were beyond common sense.

It was not possible to reach such a realm unless they possessed a certain "something" surpassing humans.

I called it "Fafnir." I had sensed something similar in Ariella and Hreidmar. Based on the number of opponents, the thought of Sleipnir flashed through my mind. However, it was hard to imagine all of them reaching such a level.

—In that case, perhaps all seven of them apart from Ariella were Hreidmars?

I recalled the soldiers clad in silver armor but was struck by a sense of dissonance. Back when I was detecting enemy presences earlier, I had not heard the metallic sound special to armored clothing. Furthermore, the armored outfits would insulate against Nergal's electroshock attack, eschewing the need to defend.

In any case, no amount of thinking on my end now would reach a conclusion. Since the smoke blocking the view was not working, it was acting as a disadvantage to my own side instead. Under such conditions, neither Mitsuki nor Ren would be able to provide cover fire.

"Air Bullet!"

Aiming the fictional armament in my left hand at my feet, I released a relatively mildly compressed bullet of air.

A whirlwind began to blow with me as the center.

With that, I was able to defend against follow-up knife attacks while ensuring visibility, killing two birds with one stone. If it succeeded in throwing my opponents off-balance, I could even shoot them with Nergal.

"...!?"

Just as I predicted, Ariella was among those people. With a somewhat hollow expression, she stared intently at me.

However, the rest of them were not Hreidmars. The possibility I had ruled out just now—the special forces unit I used to manage as their captain—the young soldiers of Sleipnir were on the other side.

Although they were still the people I knew so well, the entire team's ambiance had changed. Their faces were as blank as Ariella's with only intense desire to kill residing in their eyes.

"Onee-chan!!"

Ren cried out from the back.

"Ariella-chan!"

"Ariella-san!"

"Tia doesn't want to fight you, Ariella!"

Iris, Mitsuki and Tia also called out, but Ariella's expression did not change at all. Rather than ignoring them, it seemed more like she had not heard. She was clearly behaving strangely.

I did not know what had happened to Ariella but right now, I had to subdue her according to the battle plan.

"Ariella!"

To draw her attention, I called her name while kicking the ground to charge. Then using the lingering wind's momentum, I closed in on her in one breath.

Ariella turned her arm. Held in her hand was a silver knife.

I recalled how she had sliced my Nergal in half with her knife in the previous battle. Ariella's knife should be made of mithril. There was no way to overcome it with brute force.

"Red Bullet!"

Hence, I used the remaining dark matter, converting all of it into a blade of air.

The highly compressed blade turned scorching hot, slashing through the air with a red trail.

Ariella swung her knife at my head without hesitation.

Clang!!

A heavy impact was heard in the clash between metal and compressed air.

Her attack was quite fierce but easy to handle. Power was the only thing required to break through compressed air. A metal's hardness and sharpness made no difference.

One more step and I could reach out to touch Ariella. Sleipnir's soldiers were some distance away. Now was a perfect chance.

The dragon mark on my left hand began to pulsate while faint blue light spread out.

However, the moment just as I was about to take this final step, I felt a chill. I was currently on the boundary of life and death. Heeding instinct, I turned and retreated.

A sharp sound zoomed past. Something had brushed across the tip of my nose. Noticing the slight scattering of my bangs, I realized something had severed them. However, I did not find anything apart from knives.

I looked at the direction of the attack's source, only to see a young man there with arm raised. The remaining six also raised their arms. Next to their hands were hovering pitch-black spheres.

"What—"

This unbelievable scene made me gasp. I jumped backwards.

Next, invisible slashes flew past before my eyes, accompanied by the sound of wind slicing. The ground was cut open deeply while wind struck my face. The black spheres disappeared from the young men's hands.

—The move just now consisted of attacks launched using the transmutation of dark matter? How could that be possible...!?

Every member of Sleipnir was male. Was it possible that all of them had concealed their gender like Jeanne, but were actually Ds?

The seven young soldiers attacked me during my state of confusion. They were each holding a silver knife identical to Ariella's.

I fired Nergal to restrain and slow down the few of them approaching from the right side. At the same time, I shot the left side with consecutive bullets of air blades, the same as what I had used in the beginning.

That movement just now—This knife handling—

According to what I knew about him—Robin—he did not fight this way. Disliking close quarters combat, his forte was supposed to be using firearms to fight at mid range.

It was almost like a different person... Or rather, this was too similar to Ariella earlier.

The second and third people attacked in succession—Otr and Regin—I dodged in the nick of them, but sure enough, their movements were the same as Ariella's.

Although close quarters combat was their strength, their original traits could not have changed completely. Otr specialized in strength and Regin in skill. Their characteristics were very obvious. But right now, their movements were abnormally similar.

Using Nergal, I had pinned down the remaining four from advancing—Sigurd, Lancelot, Kunato and Nataku. As though synchronized with Ariella, they all raised their hands.

Seeing the generated dark matter, I became aware that I had not imagined what I saw earlier. For some unknown reason, they had obtained the power to generate dark matter.

In that case, it was like fighting against eight Ariellas.

It was impossible to find a chance of victory without killing anyone when the number of equal opponents increased to eight.

—However, that was assuming I was alone.

My dragon mark began to heat up.

Why was that? I knew without looking behind that "she" was going to aid me.

"Laevateinn!"

Ariella and the young men stopped attacking and jumped to the side. Immediately after that, a flash of red light swept across the passage.

Seizing the chance, I distanced myself from Ariella and Sleipnir to regroup.

"Yuu!"

Next, Kili stood by my side. Although her clothing was charred, she did not look injured.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes—before getting attacked, I used Muspelheim to detonate an explosion. The two explosions cancelled each other out."

Kili smiled with composure and looked at Ariella's group.

"You're reckless as ever... Did you get injured?"

Considering the barriers had disappeared, I knew she must have lost consciousness for a moment at least.

"I healed using biogenic transmutation. In any case, there's no problem. Never mind that, what do we do next? Things have gotten super annoying if all of them are Ds. They're probably on guard against Tia too."

Kili motioned with her eyes towards Ariella's group, which had stopped attacking, and commented seriously.

While talking, we slowly continued to distance ourselves from Ariella's group. Currently, we had already retreated to within Tia's interference range.

If possible, I would like to lure Ariella and the others into Tia's interference range, but it could be difficult depending on the situation.

"No... It's impossible for them all to be Ds. First of all, they're all guys... Having lived as roommates, I can assert with certainty. There must be some kind of reason for this."

"—Yes, I agree, because I would be troubled if there existed others sharing your special exception. There is no value except in scarcity."

Kili shrugged.

Instead of coming over, Ariella and Sleipnir scattered in the wide passage. As expected, none of them stepped into the interference zone.

Tia was using electricity to interfere. Although invisible to the eye, Ariella and her group could probably detect Tia's deployed electromagnetic domain with their sharp senses.

"....."

Ariella silently raised her hand towards us. Next, the young men did the same in unison.

"Nii-san, we will expand the barrier!"

I heard Mitsuki's voice from behind. A gust of wind blew over, probably from Mitsuki expanding the air barrier protecting Tia and company, allowing it to reach where Kili and I were standing.

After that, Ariella's group used the dark matter generated by their hands to fire jets of flame at me.

But blocked by the barrier of air, they exploded mid flight.

Sure enough, it looked like they were all capable of using dark matter. However, *supposing this fact could not possibly be true—*

Only an exceedingly clear and simple conclusion could be deduced. After I finished checking this conjecture in my mind, Ren ran forward to me.

"...Onii-chan! Why... Onee-chan—this is, so weird!"

Ren's sense of dissonance was even stronger than mine. She was speaking with a very pale face.

"Yeah, rather than having committed herself to some kind of resolve—It seems more like she's lost her sanity."

Looking at Ariella on the other side of the flaming explosion, I nodded at Ren.

"...What can we do? Onii-chan, what can we..."

Ren stared hard at me. I wanted to reassure her with a pat on the head, but my hands were occupied right now with holding Nergal and a blade of air.

Hence, I looked into Ren's eyes and voiced my thoughts loudly, audible enough for others to hear.

"Ariella might have transformed."

"...Transformed?"

Uneasily, Ren repeated what I had said.

Ariella and her group continued to attack, but Mitsuki's deployed barrier was very secure. Currently, we had the time to exchange information.

"Hreidmar—those armored soldiers I've previously fought at the mountain villa and at the Principality of Erlia—was hollow inside. Only smoke filled the interior. According to my former superior officer, Major Loki, they had *transformed as a result* of obtaining power."

"Right—You've seen what's inside them."

Kili narrowed her eyes and whispered. Working together with Jeanne, she had also seen it at the Principality of Erlia before.

"Right now, the people with Ariella is also a unit belonging to Major Loki. Compared to the time when I was still with them, their vibes and ability levels are completely different. It's possible that they've transformed as a price for obtaining a power similar to Hreidmar's."

"The price of power..."

Iris murmured softly.

Having gone through a transformation of her physical body due to Basilisk's authority, Iris had experienced what it was like. Last time, Major Loki had brought up Hreidmar's situation to illustrate a point about dragons.

From what I had heard from Charlotte, Major Loki was the descendant of the man who possessed *the authority born for the sake of killing humanity*. If this authority truly existed and Major Loki had the technology to make other people inherit it... Then everything could be connected together.

The clear dragon—"Colorless" Fafnir.

Hreidmar, Sleipnir, Ariella, and me as well—Most likely, we all held this authority.

Major Loki had said that true value lay in the ability to obtain power without transforming—And that was me. Hence, among those who had obtained the authority, I was the only one bestowed with the codename of "Fafnir."

Conversely, it implied that everyone else apart from me had transformed. However—

"Don't worry, Iris."

Without looking back, I declared strongly.

"Mononobe...?"

"If obtaining power causes transformations, there must be a way to turn back. All I need to do is repeat what I did to turn you back to human, Iris."

"Oh—"

Hearing what I said, Iris took a deep breath.

"Nii-san, I now know your intentions."

"Tia knows too!"

Mitsuki and Tia realized what I was trying to say.

However, there was something I had to tell them.

"However, there's no way I can decide the match unless I fight the current Ariella and her team with the intent to kill. But since I don't plan on 'killing' Ariella, there's absolutely no way for me to win while facing the uncertainty of what the other side will transmute using dark matter."

"What... Wait, Yuu!"

Kili glared at me angrily but I gave her a look to tell her to wait for me to finish.

"Be that as it may, I don't need to win. All I need to do is touch Ariella with my fingertip. With that, she'd surely recover her sanity. That's why, I'll be counting on you girls to cover me so that I can reach Ariella before I get killed."

I said that while moving towards the edge of the barrier where Ariella's group was attacking.

"Wait! If we do not discuss properly beforehand, we might end up obstructing you, Nii-san—"

Mitsuki called out anxiously to stop me, but I shook my head to tell her it was fine.

"Don't worry, Mitsuki. You'll act suitably when I feel it's necessary. I know this from a feeling. It'll tell me how all of you will take action, Mitsuki."

"Even if you know, this is still too..."

Mitsuki grumbled in protest. At this moment, Kili interjected.

"I believe in Yuu. When covering him just now, well—although I hate to use the word 'feeling'—I felt as though Yuu and I were joined as though of one mind. You felt the same way, right?"

I nodded at Kili's question.

"Yeah, I knew Kili would help me. Perhaps, there's some kind of link because we've become 'the same kind.'"

"In that case, Tia can definitely do it! Tia is already Yuu's wife, we can surely connect our hearts together through the bond of husband and wife!"

A competitive flame had apparently been lit in Tia's mind.

"Ehhh!? Tia-chan, it's too early to talk about husband and wife! But... I've had this feeling of connected minds too. When Mononobe selected me, a strong wave of feelings were transmitted."

Seeing Iris agreeing with Kili too, Mitsuki showed displeasure in her expression.

"Speaking of bonds with Nii-san, mine should be the strongest. Very well—I understand. Till Nii-san reaches Ariella-san's side, I shall absolutely protect him."

Next, everyone looked at Ren, who had yet to comment."

"Mm. Onii-chan... You've always known what I wanted to say even if I did not say it out. Hence, I believe in you, Onii-chan."

Ren gripped her hammer fictional armament tightly and accepted my battle plan.

"Thank you, Ren."

I smiled and looked at Ariella who was on the other side of the barrier.

"—Mitsuki, on my signal, release the barrier."

"Affirmative."

I replenished Nergal's ammunition in my right. Dispelling the blade of air in my left, I transmuted Siegfried.

Was Ariella's group trying to break through the barrier by force? Their attacks were escalating in intensity—However, this produced openings in the generation of dark matter.

Seizing the opportunity, I yelled.

"Mitsuki!"

The instant the attacks paused, I rushed out. With the barrier lowered, there was nothing to stop me anymore.

Ariella's group immediately reacted to my action and changed formation.

In the center, Ariella backed away while the young men flanked and surrounded me.

By throwing knives and transmuting dark matter from eight different directions, they attacked. Every strike was imbued with the intent to kill with certainty. A mortal wound would result no matter which attack landed.

"Antigravity!"

Using Siegfried to fire a dark matter bullet at my feet, I transmuted antigravitational matter.

Deployed with me at the center, a repulsive field deflected all attacks.

But after that, while I was running, dark matter appeared in my surroundings again.

"Tsk—"

This was the same tactic as what Iris had used to counter Leviathan's repulsive field. Attacking with dark matter directly within the field instead of from outside—

As expected, Ariella's group was currently more powerful than me. Naturally, there was a decisive gap between them, who possessed *the authority born for killing humanity*, Ariella and company who were fighting to kill, versus me, fighting without murderous intent.

However, I had already declared I would rescue her from this hopeless situation, because I had heard the thoughts in her heart.

"—Come, come, fragments of the Far Beyond."

Even more dark matter appeared in my surroundings, but it was not generated by Ariella's party. It was created by the girl with super spatial

perception who was able to exert precise control so long as explosions were the foregone conclusion.

"O raging wind, explode!"

The instant Ariella and her team's dark matter turned into exploding flames, Iris' acute voice rang out.

With the sound of an explosion, my view became blocked by black smoke, but I almost felt no impact against my body. As though it were the most natural thing in the world, I understood what Iris had done.

By making the air she had summoned explode, she had cancelled out Ariella's attack. It worked the same way as how Kili had protected herself earlier, but I received no damage at all despite my close proximity. This was evidence of perfect control of the explosion's directionality. Sure enough, Iris' talent was extremely outstanding in a most unconventional area.

At the same time, Mitsuki attacked the young soldiers.

"First Arrow—Forked Wind!"

Almost impossible to discern with the naked eye, the arrow of wind turned into countless arrows, shooting at them.

Normally speaking, it was impossible to evade, but I had braved through this move last time when I was having a disagreement with Mitsuki.

If I could do it back then, there was no reason why they could not do it now.

Like beasts, they moved between the invisible arrows. Simultaneously, they launched knives at me from unstable postures.

Continuing to advance towards Ariella, I moved slightly away from the repulsive field's zone of effect. There was very little dark matter remaining in Siegfried, insufficient to generate a strong repulsive field.

However, thanks to Mitsuki slowing them down, I received new support.

Boom—Several small projectiles of flame appeared in my surroundings, deflecting the knives away.

This was Kili's Muspelheim. By spreading out dark matter, too small for the naked eye to see, in the entire space, she was able to transmute heat at any location of her choosing.

However, this seemingly almighty barrier had a weakness. Ariella and company instantly acted in response.

Silently, they raised their hand to generate dark matter, transmuting it into white smoke.

Tiny particles of dark matter could be erased with the use of smoke. Muspelheim was neutralized as a result, but thanks to Ariella and company switching to defense, I received the chance to advance further.

I had pretty much figured out the pattern in how they generated dark matter. So far, they had all performed the same transmutation simultaneously. In that case, Ariella should be the one person capable of generating dark matter. All Ariella was doing was producing dark matter next to the young soldiers when they raised their hands.

If my speculation was correct, then there should be a delay until the next transmutation.

I was almost about to reach her.

"Yuu!"

"Onii-chan!"

Tia and Ren were the ones to buy me the time to close this gap.

Tia used lightning attacks to restrain the young soldiers while Ren made use of her massive generating capacity to create thick walls on my left and right.

My dragon mark pulsated.

Everyone's thoughts were transmitting through. I could sense their feelings. Right now, we were definitely linked together.

If this was the bond between those of my kind, there was nothing more encouraging than this.

I was not fighting alone.

Ariella—I won't let leave you behind either, all alone!

I closed in on her, extending my left hand that was holding Siegfried.

This time, I'll surely catch you. I will rescue you with this hand.

During the underground battle, I had used Ether Wind to sense Ariella's internal thoughts. Unable to stop herself, Ariella was definitely seeking help.

With a hollow expression, Ariella stared at me with eyes filled with intense killing intent and swung the knife in her hand.

It felt as though I could see an illusion of my left hand severed and my heart stabbed.

However, I ignored the warnings of instinct and pulled Siegfried's trigger.

"Ether Bullet!"

Using my fictional armament, I transmuted the remaining dark matter into golden particles, wrapping them around my left arm.

A heavy strike connected.

However, the silver blade slicing at my left arm was stopped by the golden particles.

When a living body was enveloped in concentrated Ether Wind, the soul inside would manifest. This manifested soul was immune to all physical interference.

This was a characteristic of Ether Wind that I had learned during the battle against Hraesvelgr.

Despite my lack of dark matter, it was still possible to envelope my left arm alone—I gambled on this.

Naturally, if it failed with my left arm getting severed, Ariella would probably take my life in the next strike.

In that instant, I was at least able to touch her with my fingertip.

I reached out to Ariella with my left hand, which could not move too freely after being enveloped in golden particles.

The instant my fingertip touched her forehead, the dragon mark on my left hand glowed blue—The golden particles linked our minds together.

Part 3

I saw her fragments.

People gathered around aged wooden tables, having meals in a lively setting. Two adults, five children. Probably a married couple and their children.

Laughing cheerfully, the man was a fisherman. He was recounting fun anecdotes from his experiences on the sea. Smiling, the wife chimed in with her husband. The children listened to the man, the ambiance was lively.

The girls all looked a bit similar to Ariella.

I saw her despair.

On a burning street, people kept screaming. A giant glowing bird had descended upon the scattered disarray of human corpses.

While the giant bird spread golden particles, the deceased came into view with vague outlines.

It was like stepping foot into the land of the dead. Witnessing this world, she called out to the figures of her family.

But before she could meet these souls, the deceased were devoured by the giant bird. They disappeared.

I saw her hope.

It was inside a dark house somewhere. Furniture and tableware akin to junk. The cracked walls were covered with graffiti.

But it was there that she found herself surrounded by a large family again.

All of them were young children. A variety races. They looked like they had no blood relation with one another.

However, they were definitely bound by bonds rivaling that of real brothers and sisters.

Although it was a bit of a hassle to have everyone relying on her, she found a shred of satisfaction in her torn heart.

I saw her transformation.

A D's proof appeared on her body. Despised by her trusted companions, she was cursed and denounced as a mortal enemy by the children she saw as her family.

By the time she knew it, the world had been turned upside down. Everything was unrecognizable. The end loomed into view.

Her daily life of fighting dragon-worshiping cults and looking after children was cut short. Exiled to another place, she started a new beginning. It was a sterile white box, neither dirty nor broken. In other words, a certain man's laboratory. The man had a daughter, a young girl who always followed him silently.

I saw her resolve.

It was out at sea. On a gray, completely unadorned deck, she—Ariella—had a reunion with a past comrade.

"Lieutenant Shelley, I see. My, you've really made something out of yourself."

Ariella mocked the woman dressed in the NIFL uniform.

"...I will become captain imminently. And one day, I will become the chief of NIFL's Middle Eastern Fourth Branch that was established using our organization as a foundation. Naturally—the prior assumption is that I do not end up killed by you here."

The woman replied calmly then leaned back on the ship's railing.

"I think you've gotten the wrong idea. I've no intention of seeking revenge from you. Rather, you saved me so it'd be wrong for me to hate you."

"All I saved was your life, right? Before selling you off, I already knew you might face treatment even worse than death—I still exchanged you for money despite knowing that. Hence, I already prepared myself to be killed as soon as I was ordered to make contact with you."

Hearing this, Ariella smiled wryly.

"As luck would have it, I was sold to a place much better than you imagined. I no longer had to worry about food and even found new family."

"...Is it the red-haired girl with you?"

"Yes, she's called Ren. My most precious little sister. I'm willing to do anything for her—Still, I've always remained quite concerned about the situation of my former family."

Saying that, Ariella gazed deeply into the woman's eyes.

"Your request... asking me to be a spy. No problem, I accept. However, I have a condition."

"—Very well. So long as it is within my authority and life to give, I accept any conditions no matter what."

Looking at Ariella squarely in the eyes, the woman nodded.

"In that case, there's no problem. My demand is definitely something within your power."

Ariella shrugged lightly and told the woman her condition.

"I heard that Ds can make money at Midgard by accepting requests to generate resources. I'll hand all of that money to you and I hope you can use it to let the children in the organization go to school."

After hearing Ariella's condition, the woman stood there in dumbfounded amazement.

"What... Are you serious? Those children threw rocks at you for becoming a D, don't you remember? They no longer see you as family. Even if they receive your kindness, they won't be thanking you."

"Even so—They're still family to me."

Ariella replied without hesitation.

This was not hypocrisy or charity but simply—her genuine wish.

I saw her determination.

"—Seriously, is there no other way?"

Alone in a corridor, Ariella asked stiffly with her ear pressed against her portable terminal.

'Yes, rather than Gray's unilateral decision, this is the outcome of a majority vote between major developed nations. We must obey in order to allow her to continue existing as a good sovereign.'

What was heard from the portable terminal was the voice of Shelley who had reunited with Ariella previously.

"But Gray possesses an authority that can control mankind, right?"

'Of course, Gray could also realize her will forcibly, but the result is still the same when you uses this move. She will have *no choice but to control the world*.'

"..."

Gritting her teeth, Ariella fell silent.

'Hence, you must accept this request. If you refuse, we shall resort to underhanded means if necessary...'

"...Like the time with Iris?"

After Ariella questioned quietly, the other side answered with a moment's hesitation.

'Indeed, we will threaten you like last time. Using those children at the organization as hostages, the ones you are currently supporting... Yes.'

"—How underhanded."

'We are perfectly aware of that.'

Listening to the woman's voice of self-deprecation, Ariella sighed deeply.

"Fine—I accept. Although I don't think you're the kind of villain who'd really use children as hostages, I can't take the risk. Also... For the sake of protecting those children's future, it looks like I can't avoid a battle against Gray."

Despite knowing this was a choice that would destroy her own happiness, Ariella still accepted it.

Resignation and fighting spirit—These two emotions overlapped in her heart. Ariella committed her determination to fight.

These scenes, which I had watched, turned into golden particles and disappeared into the deep darkness.

Adorning the darkness like a starry sky, the golden color gathered together in a vortex, turning into the shape of a human.

It was Ariella—

Given form by the particles, the girl looked at me, who was floating in the darkness.

"Entering another person's heart without permission, Mononobe-kun, you're really quite lacking in delicacy."

After Ariella said that, I realized it. This was the world inside Ariella's heart.

This was probably the amplified effect of the resonance caused by the same-kind transformation combined with Ether Wind's action on the mind.

"Sorry, but it's thanks to this that I found out a lot of things. I've also come to learn why you accepted NIFL's request to be a spy for them, Ariella, and why you have to kill Charl—"

Using my mind to control my body's outline, I landed in front of Ariella. My body was also giving off golden particles, wavering unsteadily.

The duration of this conversation was probably limited until the natural dissipation of all the Ether Wind I had generated. Extremely short.

"All for the sake of protecting your family at the anti-dragon organization, right?"

Hearing my question, Ariella smiled wryly.

"Yeah, but you need to concern yourself with this, Mononobe-kun. Since what I've set out to do has already failed, it's just an excuse. The other party in the deal, Captain Shelley, is an upstanding woman."

Hearing her answer, I understood Ariella's true intent.

"Really... So you wished to be stopped—That's why you wanted me to save you."

'Stop me—Save me.'

Those were Ariella's feelings that I had overheard via Ether Wind during the underground battle. That was why we could stand in her way without hesitation.

"Eh? I never said that, you know?"

"—I heard it. The voice of your heart. Ariella, you must have heard my declaration to never give up, right?"

After I said that, Ariella took a step back, extremely flustered.

"B-Back then—Mononobe-kun, you really were..."

Were she in her physical body, Ariella probably would have turned bright red in the face. She lowered her head shyly

But after a slight while, she continued speaking, still with her head down.

"But... Although I hoped to be stopped, I also wanted 'to succeed' just as much. That's why I deeply regret getting touched by you and transforming. I'm very angry at myself for feeling relieved."

Ariella clenched her fists tightly and forced these words out.

"In other words, Ariella, you hope to fight?"

I asked. Otherwise, she would not have felt emotions like regret.

"...I'm not just protecting the children who are taken hostage *now*, but also protecting the *future*."

Ariella nodded lightly before looking up.

"No matter how much Gray—the principal—struggles, it will turn into a world that she has no choice but to control. And once she exercises her authority, all conflict will be gone from the world."

"What's wrong with that?"

I asked the question that Charlotte had not answered. I could not think of any reason why world peace was bad.

"—Certainly, those living prosperous lives for want of nothing would be very happy for this kind of peace to persist. However... What about those who are suffering under tyrannical regimes, unable to escape misfortune no matter how they struggle against the state's rules?"

"..."

I took a deep breath after listening to Ariella. I was aware of the type of people she had brought up. I had seen them many times on the battlefield. Even so, the thought had not occurred to me until she

mentioned it. This meant that my value system was already using a peaceful country's as the standard.

"I hate war too, but I believe there are things in this world that must be overthrown with the use of force. A revolution is probably about to break out in the country where I used to live with my family. Of course, there's no guarantee that life hereafter will be happy but for those children, it's their only remaining hope."

I was overwhelmed by Ariella, staring at me resolutely.

What she shouldered, what she protected, was of such magnitude that it exceeded my imagination. However—

"Even if that's true... Do you mean to tell me that killing Charl is the only option?"

Unable to accept, I asked. Ariella nodded sadly.

"Yes. Well, initially I thought about letting the principal rule the world then saving my country. But after hearing from Captain Shelley about how the principal's father had stopped nuclear war, I knew it was impossible. The principal's authority isn't something that can be adjusted so precisely. It's more simple and terrifying than that."

"Simple and terrifying...?"

I repeated Ariella's words as a question. Fear and revulsion appeared on Ariella's face.

"Dominance is no easy task. Most likely, neither the principal's power, or the one held by us, Mononobe-kun and me, are things that can be unleashed in full."

Ariella's words conveyed and intense sense of crisis with slight pity and compassion mixed in her voice.

"The principal... surely knows this too. But she has no choice but to do this... She can't stop it herself. Like me, she's definitely hoping for someone to stop her. That's why I have to stop her."

Ariella clenched her fist hard. Although there were contradictions in her words, I knew she was sincere.

Next, at this moment, her outline wavered while the golden particles began to thin out.

"—It's almost at the limit."

"Looks like it."

"So I'll be your mate once I wake up from this dream...? All the unnecessary things mixed inside me—a certain 'something' born to kill humanity—I feel like it's already growing faint. I'm sure I can't stop the principal anymore."

Smiling wryly, Ariella looked at her dissolving hands.

"Sorry..."

Having deprived her of many things, all I could say was that.

"No need to apologize, Mononobe-kun. Although there are regrets, I do feel very relieved after all. But I still can't accept this."

As the particles grew dilute, Ariella's expression became distorted.

"I'll surely struggle with unsightliness. So, if possible, please don't let Ren see my unsightliness."

Ariella looked like she was about to cry now, but her figure vanished before her tears could fall.

At the same time, I could feel my own outline turn vague and ambiguous. My consciousness was about to be pulled back.

Shining brightly, the golden particles flowed past the scenes I had just witnessed—the sea of Ariella's memories—receding into the depths of darkness.

My consciousness instantly returned to reality after I could no longer see anything.

Before my eyes was Ariella's shocked face with the extended fingertip of my left hand touching her forehead.

The conversation in the dream had apparently taken place in an instant. Her body was still enveloped in blue light.

Originally blank, her face blushed slightly while my figure was reflected in her eyes of killing intent.

"Ooh..."

Her expression distorted itself as just now. A weak sound came from her lips.

"Ariella!"

Before she could do anything, I hugged her tightly first.

"...! Ooooh! Ahhhhh!!"

She struggled hard to shake off my arms, but I continued to embrace her with all my strength.

Finally, her resistance weakened and her groaning turned into sobbing.

"......Sniff...Sob...Guh..."

Ariella buried herself in my chest. Crying, she desperately tried to suppress her sobbing.

These were tears of regret. Having made contact with her heart, I understood very well.

"Onee-chan!"

I heard footsteps and Ren's voice behind me.

To calm down Ariella before Ren arrived, I stroked her slender back gently.

"...Mononobe-kun, you're really so kind."

Feeble words from Ariella's lips reached my ear.

Part 4

"...I've caused everyone trouble. I'm honestly really sorry."

Inside the underground passage with exposed pipes and wall damage from the wake of the battle, Ariella bowed her head and apologized to all of us.

The young soldiers of Sleipnir were collapsed nearby without any signs of waking up. During Ariella's transformation, they looked like they were in pain and apparently fainted.

After checking their condition, Mitsuki sighed lightly.

"Destroying facilities, leaking information... Ariella-san, you have broken these two of the school rules. These two violations cannot be forgiven lightly, but since no one was harmed as a result and your hand was forced, after consideration of extenuating circumstances, as your classmate, I would like you to write and hand in twenty repentance essays."

Speaking in a student council president's tone of voice, Mitsuki informed Ariella of her punishment.

"Umm... That's all?"

Shocked, Ariella asked in response. Mitsuki threw a glance at Kili.

"It is fine. Rather—compared to what Kili-san did in the past, Ariella-san, your violations are much 'cuter.' Kili-san, since you will be living as a Midgard student henceforth, please hand in a greater number of repentance essays than Ariella-san."

"W-Wait, stop bringing up the past! The statute of limitations has already passed for those! Besides, there isn't any evidence left behind either."

Suddenly in the hot seat, Kili argued in a panic, but Tia cornered her even further.

"No, Kili has to write repentance essays properly! Kili injured Lisa that time!"

Confronted with Tia's direct stare, Kili slumped her shoulders in resignation.

"...I got it, okay? Fine, I'll write them."

"Yes, if that's the case, Tia—will forgive you, Kili. Those who've been punished must be forgiven... That's what Lisa said."

These words caused Kili to hold her breath. She must have realized that the forgiveness brought up by Tia included more than just about Lisa's incident.

"Tia..."

After Kili showed mixed feelings in her expression, Tia looked shyly at Ariella.

"Because of that, Ariella, you don't need to apologize after writing the repentance essays. Tia won't be angry with you anymore. Tia won't feel troubled... Tia is just very worried about you, Ariella."

After Tia finished, Iris nodded firmly and agreed.

"That's right! We only came to help because we're worried about you, Ariella-chan! That's why, how should I put this...? It feels quite different from apologizing?"

Was she unable to articulate her thoughts properly? Iris waved her hands anxiously.

Then after gazing at Ariella silently the whole time, Ren quietly spoke up.

"Onee-chan... Say thanks."

"Huh?"

Ren's seemingly angry expression and voice made Ariella tilt her head in puzzlement.

"Even if you apologize... No one will be happy. That's why, say thanks instead."

After Ren forcefully repeated herself, Ariella's expression brightened up.

She smiled mildly in wryness, took and deep breath then looked at all of us in turn.

"—Thank you, everyone."

Instead of apologizing, Ariella thanked everyone.

Next, Iris and the girls smiled naturally. The atmosphere at the scene eased up.

"Mm."

After Ren nodded approvingly, tears finally began to fall from her eyes nonstop. She threw herself at Ariella's chest.

"Onee-chan, you're such an... idiot."

Ren hugged Ariella tightly and said in a trembling voice.

"Yeah—You're right. I'm really an idiot."

Ariella stroked Ren's head while answering with a wry smile.

"Mm."

Ren leaned against Ariella's chest and nodded, her slender shoulders shaking.

Seeing them hugging together like sisters, I felt relieved and took out a piece of fabric, carefully folded in my shirt pocket. It was Ariella's most precious treasure, the green ribbon she had always wore on her hair.

"Oh..."

Seeing that, Ariella inhaled lightly.

"—*You dropped this*. Don't lose it ever again."

Saying that, I extended the ribbon towards her. Ariella reached out hesitantly but she stopped the instant just before her fingertips touched the ribbon. With serious eyes, she stared at me.

"Mononobe-kun... You protected the principal."

"Yeah."

Seeing me nod without any hesitation, Ariella bit her lip. To her, this was probably what she found impossible to accept.

But having conversed with Ariella in the mental world, of course I could sense something.

"However—If Charl were to choose a wrong path, I will stop her. Naturally, it'll be a method other than killing her."

"—Huh?"

Ariella stared at me in surprise.

"You mentioned earlier, right? Charl probably hopes for someone to stop her. If that's true, let me take on this duty as her friend."

"Mononobe-kun..."

Ariella looked at me with moistened eyes.

"I will talk to Charl again after driving NIFL away. What needs to be done will be decided then."

After I voiced my thoughts, Ariella smiled and accepted the ribbon.

"—I understand now. No matter what choice you make, Mononobe-kun, I will follow you. Because... I've already... become something the same as you."

Ariella spoke in a half-joking tone before tying on the ribbon.

Ren looked up at Ariella, who was wearing her usual ponytail, and made an expression of delight.

"Mm... This hairstyle is best for Onee-chan."

Saying that, Ren looked at me as though seeking agreement.

"Yeah, that's right. Ariella is the most attractive like this."

I nodded and shared my opinion, causing Ariella to blush suddenly.

"N-No need for flattery! I know I'm not very girly, okay!"

"Huh? That's not what I think. You've got a great figure, and—"

I was about to point out the location of Ariella's charm, but immediately stopped myself. Mitsuki was staring in my direction. I could sense it without even looking back.

"And?"

"Uh—Sorry, Mitsuki's gonna be mad at me for sexual harassment if I actually say it out."

Realizing the danger in following the usual pattern and getting scolded, I sighed.

"Sexual harassment... What the heck were you going to say? Now that you've said this much, I'm very curious."

However, Ariella glared at me with dissatisfaction.

"Even if you say that..."

After I hesitated under Mitsuki's gaze, Ariella reached out and pulled me to the side.

"Then tell me secretly in a voice too quiet for Mitsuki to hear. Don't worry, I won't get mad."

"...Sure."

Since she said so, I leaned in close to Ariella's ear.

"—Ariella, I find your legs particularly pretty. During the battle, I had a really tough time trying to keep my attention away from them."

After I said that, Ariella went totally red to her ears.

"W-What—What are you saying to a girl!? I was right, you're too lacking in delicacy!"

Red in the face, Ariella looked very flustered. Watching the situation, Mitsuki said to me coldly.

"Nii-san, although I do not know what you said, please write ten repentance essays regarding the subject of sexual harassment."

"T-That's so unreasonable..."

I slumped my shoulders. Making a fist, Iris cheered me on.

"Do your best, Mononobe! Do your best together with Ariella-chan and Kili-chan!"

"Writing repentance essays for Mitsuki is such a pain. She'll get mad again if you hand in a slipshod job."

Tia muttered with annoyance. She looked at me compassionately.

"...How much do I need to write again?"

Kili murmured quietly in worry.

The mood in the passage was very relaxed, but at that moment, Mitsuki's expression suddenly tensed up while she placed her hand over her earpiece.

Mitsuki was the only one here wearing a communicator. We had refrained from equipping everyone with communicators out of concern for eavesdropping over the airwaves. Communications with the command center were essentially conducted over dedicated circuits. Hence, a message sent via communicator implied quite a serious emergency.

"——Understood. We will return immediately."

Mitsuki answered simply with a grave expression. Then she looked at us.

"A request for aid from the ground surface. The situation is quite unclear since their explanation failed to capture the key points... In any case, it seems to be quite urgent."

"Then let's go. Can we just leave things as they are?"

I pointed to the collapsed young soldiers and the destroyed partition.

"Tie them up then let the staff retrieve them. Ren-san, could you transmute something to block the passage? We will use that to replace the partition for now."

"Mm."

Ren nodded. Separating from Ariella, she generated her hammer of a fictional armament.

"Then I'll do the tying. It'll be very dangerous when they regain consciousness, so Iris and Tia should stay away. Ariella, can you give me a hand?"

"Yeah, sure."

Ariella nodded and joined me in tying up the young soldiers.

I used transmutation to create a rope while I tied up the young men one by one. Meanwhile, I asked Ariella:

"So Ariella, these guys and you were clearly acting strangely... Did Major Loki do something?"

"—All I did was swallow a capsule he gave me. It contained dried and processed blood that was made into a powder."

"Blood?"

I gazed questioningly at Ariella while my hands continued to work. She shrugged.

"Well, it could be mixed with other stuff too. After swallowing the capsule, I could feel murderous intent spontaneously flowing out from within my body—It's hard to describe clearly, but it feels something like 'the power existing to kill humans' expanded while my own consciousness was suppressed..."

"Then for these guys, who were in a similar state as you—"

Ariella nodded at me.

"Yeah, probably, they ate it too. But it's probably fine now. After you touched me, Mononobe-kun, the irrepressible impulse and the stuff clouding my mind were all cleared out."

"Well, but that's only for you, Ariella, right? Why do you say they're fine too?"

When I raised the question, Ariella scratched her cheek, slightly troubled.

"Hmm—How should I put it...? Until just now, we were completely synchronized. Like eight people as one body, our vision and senses were shared. I could also generate dark matter using them as starting points. That's why I think that my transformation must have spread to them to a certain degree."

"The transformation spread to them, don't tell me—"

A disgusting image surfaced in my mind while a chill ran through my body. Seeing me react that way, Ariella smiled wryly.

"Ahaha, I don't think they'll turn into your mates, Mononobe-kun. They're not Ds, so there won't be changes to the physical body. However, their minds might be affected."

"I-I see... Oh well, it's also a good thing for these guys to regain their sanity."

Relieved after listening to Ariella, I tied up the last guy.

Ren had also summoned a large amount of dark matter and plugged up the passage completely with a metal wall.

Our next task was to hurry to the ground surface, but I felt vaguely ill at ease as I looked at the young soldiers lying on the ground.

If what had driven Ariella and them was Code Lost, then this scrapped authority *must have gone somewhere now*.

In Ariella's case, her capacity as a vessel might have increased as a result of transforming into "my kind." But beyond that—if the young soldiers regained their sanity, then the only conclusion was that they had lost the authority.

However, Iris had not lost Basilisk's authority when she transformed from touching me. If that was the case, it would be quite strange if an authority was lost because of the "same-kind transformation."

—Speaking of which, Ariella had said that contact with me caused "unnecessary things inside her to grow faint."

In other words, in her case, the power obtained through the capsule was perhaps a foreign entity that did not belong to her. In that case—

"Nii-san, let us move out."

Since I had stopped walking, Mitsuki called out to me.

"...Yeah."

While I nodded and started walking, what flashed through my mind was that sneering face of Major Loki—the "son of the hero."

Chapter 3 - Inherited Lost Code

Part 1

"—Someone powerless huh. Seriously... That's quite a painful jab."

Rewinding to an hour or so earlier, inside the Naglfar's operations room... Loki Jotunheim was smiling wryly at the screen after the call disconnected.

Ariella Lu was completely on the mark. Discovering the opponent's weakness in an instant was part of a killer's essential skills. In that sense, her talents were clearly evident.

"Just as you say, Ariella Lu, I have never seen anyone as powerless as I am."

This was neither humility nor self-deprecation. Loki was simply stating the truth calmly.

Power was that which was required to do certain things.

To stand up, to walk, to obtain food, to earn money, to plunder, to fight, to flee—All this required power.

Muscle power, physical power, military power, financial power, power of intellect, power of authority... There were more types of power than one could count.

Holding power unsuited to the target would be useless. There were also situations where necessary power was impossible to obtain due to incompatibility. From this perspective, the man named Loki Jotunheim was a powerless human, lacking in the power required to attain his own goal.

"However, I have never envied *you lot*. Not even once."

Loki raised his head and looked at his subordinates in the room.

They were nameless soldiers clad in silver armor. Even if they heard Loki, they remained standing motionlessly without any reaction.

However, Loki did not hold them responsible for displaying such an attitude because all they were capable of recognizing were commands from Loki. That was how they had been tuned.

Loki slowly stood up and stopped walking in front of them.

"Rather, I'm grateful for this from the bottom of my heart. Because I am powerless, I did not end up as a tool for those NIFL geezers. Instead, I became a person who works hard and struggles for my goals."

Using his hand to touch an armored outfit's cold and hard exterior, Loki quietly continued.

"Were I perfect and flawless, I never would have mastered the art of controlling others. My superior power would have turned me into something to be exploited, a disposable weapon—Just like you lot and my father."

Loki narrowed his eyes and spoke. With his hand, he knocked on a motionless soldier's chest armor.

"However... There are times when humans have no choice but to take action personally. What times are those, would you say?"

The armored soldiers said nothing, but a faint metallic sound could be heard. Loki knew they were trembling. Trembling in the face of *lethal threat* was a living organism's natural response.

"Here's the answer: when no one but yourself *can get the job done*. My remaining trump cards were Sleipnir and 'Fafnir,' two of them. Now that neither of them could respond to my expectations—"

At this moment, Loki paused. Pointing at an armored soldier's throat with his finger, he smiled.

Then as though carving these words into himself, he continued in a sinister manner.

"—I shall abandon this lovely powerlessness."

Part 2

In order to reach the ground surface from the underground passage where the battle against Ariella had taken place, it was necessary to

move to the clock tower's underground level then take the elevator there.

But before we left the building—the instant we got off the elevator—we were greeted by the sight of calamity.

"This is..."

I took a deep breath and examined the ground floor. There were several women collapsed, apparently Midgard staff. A mildly rusty smell greeted our noses.

"—It's the smell of blood."

I frowned and said to Ariella and the girls who were getting off the elevator after me.

"Eh!? Are they already—"

Iris cried out and looked at the people who were collapsed on the floor with pallid faces.

"No... They do not appear to have external injuries. I believe they are only unconscious. However, I have not been able to establish communications since a while ago. What on earth happened...?"

Mitsuki approached the collapsed women and refuted what Iris was about to say.

"Anyway, this doesn't look minor. We have to clarify the situation as quickly as possible."

Kili suggested while staying vigilant of the surroundings. Tia nodded firmly in agreement.

"Go to Lisa and the others! Tia is very worried!"

"Mm."

Ren also grabbed my shirt and urged me to hurry over.

"—Got it. But let's be careful, everyone."

Standing in the lead, I went through the automatic door at the entrance to exit the clock tower.

The smell of blood grew stronger and stronger.

It was currently late at night. Normally, all lights would be off in school, but due to the emergency situation, the entire campus was illuminated. What the light reflected was a red color covering the entire sky.

"Crimson... mist?"

Iris murmured.

"Generate squall!"

Almost at the same time, Ariella raised her gauntlet fictional armament and yelled. After a strong gust of wind blew, the scent of blood became lighter.

"Onee-chan?"

Ren looked at her in puzzlement, prompting Ariella to answer with a stiff expression.

"Best not to inhale this mist. Well... I guess it might be too late by the time you smell it."

"...You think it's something like poison gas?"

Kili asked Ariella after cautiously checking the surroundings.

"No, rather than poison gas... This is surely—"

Did something occur to her? Ariella hesitated.

"Oh, it's Lisa and Firill."

However, Ariella was interrupted by Tia's joyful voice. Despite my concern about what she was going to say, I still went up to greet the two girls descending from the sky.

They looked relieved to see Ariella, who was scratching her cheek in embarrassment.

"Ariella-san—Allow me to say this to you first, welcome back."

"Umm... Yeah, I'm back. Sorry."

Ariella lowered her head after nodding at Lisa.

Firill tapped Ariella on the shoulder, causing her to look up.

"Welcome back, Ariella. I've got things to say to you, but let's have a proper chat later."

Firill motioned to the crimson mist with her eyes.

I followed her gaze to check out the situation.

"I'm glad you two are okay. What the heck is that red mist...?"

Lisa gazed at me gravely after hearing my question.

"We are the only ones who are fine. While that red mist was in the process of spreading, the members of the Dragon Subjugation Squad lost consciousness successively. It is now impossible to sustain the barriers."

Firill continued after Lisa's answer.

"However, it's the same for NIFL, so the school grounds haven't been breached yet. Apart from those hacked by Tia, the majority of unmanned weapons have been destroyed too, so no worries there."

Listening to these reports, Mitsuki showed surprise in her expression.

"In other words, this mist is not an attack launched by NIFL?"

Hearing this question, Lisa nodded with a serious look.

"Indeed. Rather—The effect on NIFL has been very severe. According to what I could observe from the sky... This mist is also spreading around Midgardsormr's final defense line and has covered NIFL's fleet."

"..."

I gasped after listening to Lisa. What Ariella was about to say earlier—was most likely the same as what I was thinking now.

A red mist with the smell of blood. Neutralized NIFL soldiers and the mist-covered fleet.

Although the presence of victims on our own side raised questions, the most logical conclusion was that "she" had caused the current situation.

"Yuu, someone is coming."

Just at at that moment, I was pulled back from deep thought by Kili's voice.

I looked where Kili indicated. A figure came into view, walking along the path leading to the gym. Due to the excessive brightness of the surrounding illumination, all I could tell from the figure was that it belonged to a woman. She was currently approaching us.

I reflexively raised my guard but I realized her identity as soon as I got a proper look at her clothing.

She was wearing an old-fashioned maid outfit. Only one person dressed like this on this island.

"Mica-san!"

I called her name while running over.

"Mononobe... -san."

Mica-san sank to her knees after calling my name hoarsely. Upon closer examination, I saw that her maid outfit was tattered.

Stained with blood all over, there also seemed to be bullet holes left behind from gunshots.

"Did you get shot!? We'll treat your wounds immediately—"

I reached out to check her injuries, but Mica-san refused me politely.

"...Do not worry. The wounds have already healed. I am one of Charlotte-sama's followers who have been bestowed with her blood..."

"But why are you in such pain?"

If it was the same as Shinomiya-sensei's case, she would not die from such wounds. However, Mica-san was sweating profusely from her forehead and too weak to stand up.

Following me to approach, Iris and the girls looked at Mica-san in worry.

"This... This is not my pain. It is Charlotte-sama's."

"Charl?"

I frowned. Mica-san nodded feebly.

"This situation... was caused by Charlotte-sama. The vicinity has been shrouded by a large volume of stored blood in the form of mist, thus placing all of NIFL's people under control in one fell swoop."

Listening to Mica-san, everyone had questions.

"Since the principal did it, why are the staff and the Dragon Subjugation Squad also...?"

Iris asked in puzzlement.

"Due to controlling too many people simultaneously... Detailed adjustments are impossible. It might be more apt to call it going out of control. I am about to lose consciousness too..."

Mica-san pressed on her forehead in pain and finished. Firill cocked her head in puzzlement.

"If the principal's power has gone out of control... Why are we okay?"

"Because... Well, allow me to confirm first. All of you have chosen to make contact with Mononobe-san, haven't you?"

Confronted with Mica-san's question, Firill nodded in a slight fluster.

"Huh? Hmm, umm... Well, in a way... I guess?"

Blushing, Firill sought everyone's agreement.

"Y-Yes—everyone here... including Ariella-san, has already made contact with Nii-san."

After Mitsuki answered on everyone's behalf, Mica-san said "I see" quietly.

"In that case—therein lies the reason. Having transformed into Mononobe-san's kind, all of you became more 'superhuman' existences than ordinary Ds. As such, Charlotte-sama's power to control mankind has not affected you."

"'Superhuman' existences..."

I was shaken by these words but Iris seemed unaware. She continued to ask:

"Then we'll be fine?"

"No... Charlotte-sama's power worked properly when healing Mononobe-san's injuries. In other words, the effects are simply delayed instead of not taking action at all."

Mica-san shook her head and refuted Iris.

Charlotte's power had definitely helped me out a lot. In other words, the fact that we were considered human beings despite our transformations

was a disadvantage in this situation, but I felt slightly relieved. At this moment, Iris looked up at the clock tower in worry.

"—If that's the case, Shion-chan, who's nearer to the principal... and Vritra-chan, who's a dragon, should be fine. But Jeanne-chan is definitely..."

As an ordinary person, Jeanne had likely lost consciousness like the staff and the girls of the Dragon Subjugation Squad. Was Mitsuki picturing the situation? Her face was clouded by uncertainty.

"I am quite worried... The principal's situation needs to be verified. Perhaps it would be better if we returned."

"Wait, Mitsuki."

The one who disagreed was Ariella, who had been showing a somber expression the whole time.

With everyone's gaze gathered on her, Ariella looked sharply at Mica-san.

"Detailed adjustments are impossible due to controlling a large number of people—That's what you said just now. But isn't this situation actually the true nature of the principal's authority?"

"..."

Questioned by Ariella, Mica-san silently averted her gaze. Suspicious of how the two of them were acting, I interjected.

"Ariella, what is the meaning of this?"

"A similar phenomenon happened when the principal's father exerted control on a wide scale to prevent nuclear war. It seems he forcibly stopped the phenomenon at the time, but a group of people felt greatly threatened by his authority. Rather than dominance, isn't that power something else?"

"—"

Mica-san gripped her fist silently. This expression conveyed a kind of suffering different from pain.

"It was also to prevent her from controlling the world that I betrayed everyone to go kill the principal. If what I heard from NIFL was true, then it's definitely not simple dominance. What's happening here can't be described simply as the authority going out of control. So right now, it's extremely dangerous to approach the principal."

Ariella warned us strongly while waiting for Mica-san's response.

"...What you say is indeed correct. Until now, Charlotte-sama had been using all her effort to suppress her authority from operating with full functionality."

Mica-san lowered her gaze and spoke while avoiding eye contact.

"I knew it. So—If she fails, what will happen exactly?"

"Well..."

Mica-san hesitated. When Ariella urged her to continue, the air shook.

BOOOOOOM...!

"What happened—?"

With the sound of a heavy explosion, black smoke began to rise on the opposite of the school building.

"It is in the front gate's direction. Judging from the distance, the explosion should have happened outside the campus..."

Lisa looked up at the smoke and remarked, but her face was filled with puzzlement. Firill was also frowning and tilting her head in disbelief.

"But NIFL's people have lost consciousness... And Tia should've hacked all the remaining unmanned weapons near the school... So who on earth—"

Listening to the two girls, Mitsuki crossed her arms and spoke with a troubled look:

"Capable of moving under such conditions, the other party must be 'superhuman' like us."

"—"

I held my breath. In other words, the other side consisted of humans transformed by an authority.

Like how Shion had gone on a rampage as Kraken Zwei or Iris had Basiliskified.

Earlier, Ariella and the members of Sleipnir must have been transformed by Code Lost. Ariella had swallowed a capsule and I would assume the young soldiers of Sleipnir had done the same. Naturally, the one who gave them these capsules was my former superior officer, Major Loki.

In that case, it would not be surprising if Major Loki had dispatched more forces powered by the scrapped authority.

"Don't worry, Mononobe-kun."

Ariella's voice interrupted my thoughts. It looked like she was thinking of the same thing but she was smiling with confidence.

"No matter what comes, nothing can be stronger than I was earlier. That level of combat potential would've been deployed in battle together. There's no reason to hold it in reserve."

"...True. Okay, then let's—"

I was about to suggest hurrying over to that side, but Ariella stopped me in a sharp voice.

"But Mononobe-kun, are you still sure you want to protect the principal after seeing the current situation? Handled poorly, it might become impossible to revert things for everyone on this island, you know?"

This viewpoint was perfectly natural for Ariella, who saw Charlotte as dangerous. However, I was firmly set in my conviction.

"Since something similar has happened before—Charlotte must have predicted this. Despite knowing that, she still skirted the boundary, forcibly trying to protect Midgard. In that case, I trust Charl will succeed."

"Then... Mononobe-kun, are you planning to do nothing and leave fate to her?"

"No, I'm not planning to do nothing. If a threat approaches Charl, I'll protect her. If she's feeling discouraged, I'll cheer her on by her side. This is what I can do as her friend."

Hearing my answer, Ariella showed surprise on her face.

"Cheer her on... I see. Fufu. That's my Mononobe-kun. Oh well... Since I've already decided to follow you, I won't complain a single word."

Apparently reassured, Ariella accepted my approach.

Next, Mitsuki approached me and said:

"—Then it is settled. No one has any objections regarding the matter of protecting the principal, right?"

Mitsuki asked the group. After everyone expressed agreement, Mitsuki turned her gaze back to me.

"Well then, Nii-san, let us go check what the explosion noise earlier was about, shall we? Mica-san, please stay put here."

"...Very well, thank you."

Mica-san replied in a pained voice and bowed her head deeply at us.

When she looked up again, she made eye contact with me and smiled.

"Charlotte-sama... truly has a wonderful friend..."

Part 3

As we neared the front gate, we were greeted by the sight of burning red flames mixed with dust and smoke.

Explosions were heard one after another. Ariella had deployed an air barrier against the red mist, so the burning smell could not reach us— But the quantity of smoke rising into the sky was clearly unusual.

"That hue of the flames... It's the color of when the special fuel used in unmanned weaponry burns. What exploded was probably a large unmanned weapon."

I ran while telling everyone my deductions. Using her fictional armament to fly, Tia frowned.

"That probably is an unmanned weapon that Tia hacked. Tia will fly higher to confirm."

"Don't, carelessly increasing your altitude is very dangerous. If unmanned weaponry is getting destroyed, the enemy likely has high-power weapons. Everyone, focus on protecting yourself."

I called out to Mitsuki and the girls behind me while summoning Siegfried, my fictional armament in the form of an ornamental gun. Tia was the only one flying but everyone else had their respective fictional armaments wielded. The only exception was Kili who treated the surrounding space itself as a weapon.

The smoke source was outside the front gate. What appeared to be a giant plate of armor, presumably sent flying by an explosion, was embedded in the automatic security gate that we normally passed through using our portable terminals.

We cautiously went over the destroyed main gate and exited the campus.

Several multi-legged unmanned weapons were burning intensely on the road where lively crowds of students would pass through on their school commute in the mornings and evenings.

Next, three figures appeared before us. Accompanied by a large explosion, they were illuminated by the flames.

"What—"

I could not help but doubt my own eyes.

The two people standing on the left and right were soldiers clad in armored outfits, the same as the Hreidmars whom I had fought many times, but could also be humanoid drones too.

Reflecting red light from the flames, the armored soldiers were each wielding all kinds of ridiculous heavy weapons. They were surely the ones responsible for destroying the unmanned weapons.

However, the problem was the slender man flanked by the two armored soldiers.

Dispatching Hreidmars and unmanned weaponry was foreseeable to a certain extent, but I never expected "him" to head to the frontline himself—

"Major Loki..."

When I called out his name, he—Major Loki—grinned. Although it was too far for voices to be heard, he must have read my lips.

"Heh... So that's him? I feel a different vibe from him compared to our conversation over the communicator. He doesn't seem like the type to be on the frontlines..."

By my side, Ariella showed a slightly doubtful look.

It seemed like she was getting the same feeling as me. However, having worked with him for so long, what I felt was not limited to a sense of

dissonance. There was also a terrifying feeling somewhat different from before.

Something... was off.

Leading two armored soldiers, Major Loki was giving off an extremely fearsome aura. What intimidated me was surely more than the frightening and terrifying feeling coming from him.

A lethal situation that my current self was unable to oppose, my instincts warned intensely.

"Nii-san, what is the matter? Although the enemy is equipped with heavy weaponry, there are only three of them. At this distance, we can deploy barriers while overwhelming them unilaterally."

Controlling her voice, Mitsuki sought my opinion.

It was indeed as she described. With a sufficiently wide open space, Ds were able to make full use of their powers. Bombarding enemies from this distance without approaching recklessly would be the best tactic. Since Major Loki's objective was to kill Charlotte, there was no point in wasting words with him now.

However—Despite knowing all this, I could not issue the order.

My heart was filled with a sense of foreboding that something irrevocable might happen if we made a move carelessly.

"Mononobe?"

Iris and the girls looked at me in puzzlement but I remained stuck in hesitation.

"Yuu—Tia's is coming."

At this moment, hovering overhead, Tia whispered quietly to me.

Although I could not understand what she meant, soon enough—I figured it out after seeing the multi-legged unmanned weapon rushing

out from the side of the main road. She was referring to the unmanned weapon she had hacked.

However, the soldiers equipped with heavy weapons and armor did not move. Neither did Major Loki show any intent to evade the unmanned weapon charging at him. He simply looked at it in irritation.

—BOOM!!

Instantly, without any prior warning, the unmanned weapon exploded.

"What...?"

I totally had no idea what happened. No one had attacked, yet this powerful weapon was suddenly rendered into wreckage.

"Tia-san, do you know what happened?"

Lisa asked Tia who had the unmanned weapon under her control, but Tia shook her head in shock.

"Dunno... It suddenly exploded."

"It's almost like my Muspelheim... But it's not. He shouldn't be a D and in this dusty environment, tiny particles of dark matter cannot be sustained at all."

Kili looked gravely at the destroyed unmanned weapon and Major Loki. Everyone else had trouble hiding their surprise but another scene took place to further deepen our puzzlement.

One of the armored soldiers suddenly lost strength in his knees and collapsed on the ground.

"What's with... that guy?"

Firill murmured in doubt.

"...Was he injured by shrapnel from the explosion?"

Ren brought up the most likely possibility but I had seen clearly that the armored soldiers were unharmed.

Watching us react, Major Loki smiled with delight. Then he walked slowly towards us.

"Nii-san!"

Mitsuki pleaded with me again to issue orders. There was no time for hesitation.

"I'll go. Before we find out what Major Loki—that man, in other words—has done, don't any of you make a move."

I ordered the girls in forceful tone of voice then started walking forward.

"Wait, Mononobe-kun. If you do this in this kind of situation, he'll surely—"

Ariella stopped me frantically but I shook my head lightly.

"...I know. But that's why I must go."

The fact that he was standing in Charlotte's red mist without behind controlled stood as evidence that he was no ordinary person. In other words, it was very likely that Major Loki also possessed Code Lost.

I walked forward while paying attention to the armored soldier behind Major Loki. The other armored soldier remained collapsed on the ground, unmoving.

Major Loki halted when our separation had shrunk to five meters. I stopped accordingly and stood face to face with him.

"Hello, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe."

Major Loki spoke with his usual tone and expression but there was something different about his gaze towards me. Until now, he had looked at me as though facing livestock—a downward gaze—together

with a sense of pity towards one of his own. But now, his eyes contained cold mercilessness as though looking at prey he was about to hunt.

"Major Loki..."

I focused my mind to prevent my wavering from causing my fictional armament to disappear. At the same time, I stared at Major Loki.

"I already know of Sleipnir's defeat, but never did I expect her to show up with you. Sleipnir is supposed to be impossible to stop by any means except killing them."

Major Loki glanced behind me and smiled. He was probably looking at Ariella.

"2nd Lieutenant Mononobe choosing to stay on Gray's side, defeating Sleipnir then showing up to obstruct me—Under such conditions, you were supposed to be filled with murderous rage towards me due to being forced to dispose of Ariella Lu by your own hand."

With an expression conveying his surprise at the unexpected turn of events, he shrugged.

"Do you... wish to exact revenge from me?"

Informed of Major Loki's intent, I asked cautiously.

"No—It simply saves me a bit of effort. Besides, it allowed me to talk to you. If anything, I might say that this current meeting is what I hoped for."

"By this point, what is there for us to discuss?"

Our positions were in complete opposition, which meant that there should be no point in negotiating. Although that was what I thought, Major Loki nodded.

"Indeed, *this is the end*, which is why I have things to tell you. Relax, this isn't my last wish. I don't do useless stuff like that. What I'm about to say

is for insurance. For the sake of leaving a complete successor behind regardless of fate's machinations."

"Successor?"

When I frowned and repeated what Major Loki said, he nodded deeply.

"Indeed, the successor of the clear dragon—'Colorless' Fafnir—is essential to the current world."

"..."

This was what Charlotte had told me, the name of the dragon holding "the power born to kill humanity."

"Judging from this reaction of yours, you've already heard the gist from Gray. That makes things easy. Fafnir is the name of the one who scrapped the killing authority. The being capable of killing even the immortal Gray. In the past, that was what my father called it."

"The one who assassinated Charl's father... I heard that NIFL treats him as a 'hero.'"

"—Indeed. And hopes were placed in me as the 'son of the hero.' I received the best education and greedily absorbed knowledge and skills, distinguishing myself with various accomplishments. And I intended to respond to their expectations, but... I lacked the most crucial talent."

Major Loki continued in self-deprecation.

"The day my father died, I was still in my mother's womb... *and did not inherit the authority*."

"Huh—"

His unexpected words made me exclaim in surprise.

Was my reaction exactly the same as what Major Loki predicted? He laughed sarcastically.

"Knowing the truth of the expectations laid upon me as I entered NIFL, yet aware that I lacked the essential talent, for the very first time, I was confronted with my own powerlessness and what was impossible for me."

"Major Loki doesn't have an authority..."

Still in doubt, I muttered in surprise. Although this was only natural upon further thought, for someone like me who never thought of him as "powerless," this was a shocking truth.

Just as Ariella had pointed out earlier, there was no reason for him to hold back combat potential in reserve. If Major Loki possessed the same kind of potent power wielded by Sleipnir and Hreidmar, he could have finished the job on his own.

Hence, it was only logical that he did not possess Code Lost.

No... But that was only up until now. Why was he here currently—standing calmly without being controlled by the red mist of blood?

This contradiction troubled me. Major Loki spoke in delight while the corners of his mouth twisted in a grin.

"Are you that surprised? Then my acting skills must be too good. From the start, I was a weakling inferior to you. Hence, I gathered people who possessed power and focused on conducting research. This was to investigate as much as possible about the Gray I had to defeat."

Major Loki looked up at the red mist and asked me:

"2nd Lieutenant Mononobe, before Gray exerted control—Did you know about that authority's true nature?"

"No..."

I shook my head. Ariella had said that Charlotte's power was not dominance but possibly "something else"—But what exactly, I had not heard. Mica-san had also glossed over the issue.

However, Major Loki seemed to have obtained the answer. Without any uncertainty, he spoke.

"The authority of the gray dragon—the 'Gray' Vampire—is an authority born for the sake of *uniting the human race into one being*."

"...Unite? What the heck are you talking about?"

Unable to understand him, I frowned.

"Is it hard to understand? ...Then let me use the word 'assimilate.' Using Gray's bodily fluids as a medium, synchronizing oneself with others to exert control, thereby conferring immortality upon others at the same time. In a certain sense, isn't that making them a part of Gray?"

"That's..."

I was rendered speechless. Indeed, dominance was also about making others belong to you, turning them into a part of you. Taking into account what had been said just now, it was now possible to explain why accepting her bodily fluids would heal wounds.

"Since it is an authority born for the sake of uniting the human race into one being, this power was entrusted to one person. And precisely because he understood this point, the previous Gray had exerted dominance at a minimum level, limiting it to key individuals in power. However, once the authority goes out of control, this is the result."

Major Loki gestured towards Midgard, covered in the red mist of blood.

"When the authority is activated fully, all humans apart from Gray will lose their minds, turned into cells with collective immortality. Ultimately, *both authorities*, bestowed for the sake of delivering the world from mankind's hands, exist to kill humans."

With hostility towards the world, Major Loki spoke with displeasure.

"...Even if what you say is true, Charl didn't use her power that way. Right now, she's still hanging on to control it. That's why, no matter

what you say... I won't become Charl's enemy. If Charl is going to walk down a wrong path, I will correct her as a friend. Of course, *killing her is not an option*."

I deliberately avoided using polite language and retorted against Major Loki in a forceful tone of voice.

Major Loki proceeded to smile with a sigh.

"Hoo—by now, I don't think I can still appease you either. Neither do I believe that Gray would be stupid enough to let her authority go out of control intentionally. What makes me reject Gray's existence is not because of the authority she holds but the fact that she imposes a state of peace on the world."

"Because armies are not needed without war...?"

When I voiced my speculation, Major Loki shrugged in exasperation.

"It's certainly not a cost and benefit calculation. If Gray's dominance is established, there won't be any lives lost due to war. On the other hand, *those whose lives cannot be extended except by fighting will end up dead*. This is undoubtedly the dragon disaster caused by the gray dragon."

Did he think this explanation was enough? Major Loki stared at me.

"Don't tell me... it's because dragon disasters must be stopped? As NIFL's responsibility, that's why—"

"Somewhat different from NIFL's responsibility, I simply believe this is a 'hero's duty.' You may laugh at me, but I truly intend to be a 'hero,' unlike my father who had failed to actualize it—To become a genuine 'hero' instead of being an exploited tool."

After Major Loki said all this with eyes of firm determination, he waved his hand at the armored soldier behind him.

"What are you planning—"

I readied a stance warily but Major Loki simply knocked on the head of the armored soldier who was standing still on the side and issued a brief command.

"Remove."

Next, the armored soldier tossed away the heavy weaponry in his hands then operated his headgear to remove the helmet.

The face of a man in his late thirties was revealed. Although he was different from Hreidmar in that his interior was not hollow, the man's gaze was blank and unfocused.

After glancing coldly at him, Major Loki returned his gaze to me.

"However, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe, I lack the necessary power to be a 'hero'—the authority required to exterminate Gray. Hence, I have gathered potential holders from around the world. This guy is one of them—a mass murderer on death row from a certain country."

Major Loki placed his hand on the man's shoulder and spoke.

"So this man... has Code Lost?"

Skeptically, I looked at this sorry excuse for a man. His condition was similar to Ariella and Sleipnir when they were fighting me earlier, except that the heavy killing intent had not manifested in him.

"Indeed, that being said—his authority is very diluted. As its name implies, the scrapped authority is an abandoned power. The first Fafnir did not use that power even once, hence the authority has not manifested in full. After his death, the authority was inherited by others, spread in a weakened form. No longer worthy of being called an authority, consisting only of lingering fragments... Something that should be called the scrapped factor. From other people's view, these holders are simply too talented at murder."

After saying that, Major Loki gestured with his gaze towards the man who was standing perfectly still.

"This amount of the scrapped factor is nowhere capable of killing Gray. The special qualities of a so-called authority cannot be breached except by someone holding at least as much of the scrapped quantity as my father did. Hence, I researched the succession rules of authorities and methods for distilling the factor. Death row prisoners like this guy is what I used to carry out my experiments. As for the resultant existence—I'm sure you know very well."

At Major Loki's prodding, I spoke hesitantly.

"...Hreidmar?"

Unable to think of anything, I said the name of the armored soldier that was the prototype of "Fafnir."

"Indeed. Those who have inherited the scrapped factor from multiple people are the Hreidmars. However, the physical body ends up getting transformed by the excess scrapped factor, resulting in an unstable form that cannot be sustained without wearing an armored outfit."

Major Loki shrugged and deliberately looked behind me.

"After that, I conducted research on collective application of the scrapped factor by having it spread over multiple holders. The completed product is Sleipnir with the inclusion of Ariella Lu. However—along the way, I discovered the rare vessel that is you."

An intense chill ran down my spine. I felt a foreboding sense of *what had been done to me—*

"No way, me too..."

"Indeed. You might not have noticed, but your body has inherited the scrapped factor many times. Guiding the inheritance of authorities is very simple. Priority in authority succession is decided by the depth of karma. Although the blood relationship of parent and child is a very deep one, the strongest karmic relationship is formed between 'the killer and the killed.'"

"The killer and the killed..."

For sure, we had inherited authorities after killing dragons. The one to take a life and the one whose life was taken—The creation of this strong karmic relationship was presumably what had guided us to inherit authorities.

"Consequently, the probability of succession is dramatically increased by blood relations and the killer-victim connection. The most efficient method was to have test subjects drink your blood laced with poison."

"What..."

I could not help but hold down my empty right hand. Major Loki's calamitous experiment made me breathe irregularly.

—How many people's lives had been used to cultivate my "Fafnir"?

While I was feeling dizzy from the sacrificed lives, Major Loki motioned to the man on the side and smiled cruelly.

"No need to be so shocked about all this. All the people used for experimenting had been sentenced to death. Dead men walking. Furthermore, you showed no signs of transformation despite obtaining the factor comparable to Hreidmar's amount. Hence, I believe you are precisely the one compatible with Fafnir. However—You chose to take Gray's side."

Major Loki sighed and stared at me.

"Oh well, this was foreseeable too. Although my expectations were betrayed, the plan remains flawless. The only surprise was that you stopped Sleipnir without killing them. Perhaps because of that, *I inherited their scrapped factor instead of you*."

"—So in the end, Major Loki, you took the authority..."

I had already guessed when I saw that he had not fallen under Charlotte's control.

"Sleipnir had taken medication made from my father's blood because I knew that his blood, from Fafnir's direct descendant, could activate the scrapped factor. The karma of this blood is probably what allowed me to become the prioritized successor. Truly... unexpected. To think that I had already made preparations to fight you assuming your inheritance of Sleipnir's factor—"

"What... do you mean?"

A loathsome premonition rose in my heart. I now knew the true identity of the capsule Ariella had swallowed, but my failing to inherit her factor was something unforeseen?

In that case, what exactly had Major Loki done as preparations—

"About a hundred people."

"...Huh?"

"That is the number of scrapped factor holders required *to compete with you* after your presumed acquisition of Sleipnir's factor. Just now, I executed the remaining hundred or so test subjects, using poison mixed with my blood."

Major Loki laughed heartily, holding his chest with his hand.

"Don't tell me—"

He had used the same method as what he did to guide the scrapped factor to my body. In that case, right now, he was—

"Indeed, what I have inherited is the factor from them. Hence, I have Sleipnir's factor added as well. To be honest, I had worried whether I might turn into a gas like Hreidmar, but it looks like my capacity as Fafnir's direct descendant is greater than I imagined."

He raised his hand and pointed his fingertip at the armored soldier.

"As a result, I've obtained power beyond expectation. The power I can use right now is infinitely close to the original Code Lost."

All my hair stood on end. Although Major Loki was carrying a gun, he did not draw it out. He simply pointed the finger of his empty hand at the man.

Feeling a premonition that he was going to do something dangerous, I yelled out.

"Stop—"

However, he swung his hand a moment before I called out to stop him.

Nothing changed. The man remained standing there, his glazed eyes staring at the sky.

But why was I trembling with my back breaking out in cold sweat, the pounding of my heart echoing in my ears?

"Just now, I imagined the manner of this man's death."

Was this the reason? Loki's voice, speaking these words calmly, sounded as though it had been transmitted from afar.

"..."

I could not understand what sort of actual effect this would do. I looked back at Major Loki. He smiled and continued explaining.

"Behind me, the unmanned weapon is still burning intensely, right? A large explosion will happen there, producing a piece of shrapnel to pierce his neck vertebra. Oh right, it won't happen until five seconds or so later."

Turning around to motion towards the burning remains of an unmanned weapon, Major Loki began a countdown.

"Three, two, one—"

—Boom!

At the end of the countdown, his words instantly turned into reality.

"Gah, hah—"

Standing still, the man made a sound from his mouth for the first time. However, it was the sound of a life extinguished.

A piece of sharp metal fragment had pierced the man's throat. Flying due to the explosion, the metal shrapnel had accurately penetrated the man's neck vertebra from behind.

Thud, the man collapsed on the ground. Behind me, Iris and the girls began to clamor as a result of witnessing this scene. Someone screamed.

Major Loki looked down coldly at the man who had died on the spot. With a completely unemotional voice, he said quietly:

"Hoo... Considering his crimes, this death is a bit too comfortable. But anyway, I suppose this is a reward for his cooperation in my experiments until now."

—Incomprehensible. What Major Loki had done was totally incomprehensible.

Using a time bomb would allow the explosion to occur at a predicted time, but the trajectories of flying shrapnel should be impossible to control.

"How did he die—No, he was killed... right?"

I asked in confusion. Major Loki nodded.

"Indeed. Just now was undoubtedly a demonstration of *murder* according to my will. Achieving quantum resonance by using the shared characteristic of 'humanity'—using the state of synchronization to cause limited interference in the law of causality—this is the true form of the 'lethal gold' held by Fafnir 'the embracer,' the true nature of Code Lost. Although everything until this point was theoretical, it is finally proven now that the power has fallen into my hands."

"Resonance... Law of causality...?"

I frowned at the incomprehensible explanation.

"—It must be difficult for you. Simply stated, it is the power *to twist a human's fate, thereby forcing certain death upon that person*... Such is the nature of the scrapped authority."

Major Loki spoke casually but this was absolutely not something that could be accepted so easily.

"This ridiculous nonsense—"

"2nd Lieutenant Mononobe, what are you so surprised about? You've been using this power to survive all this time. *Never losing against human opponents, no enemy you cannot kill*... If such absolutes existed for certain, isn't that equivalent to deciding your opponent's fate?"

"—"

No words to refute him. When giving up myself to "Fafnir," I felt as though victory was guaranteed. Multiple pathways leading to the opponent's death would appear in my mind, extending all the way to the very end.

"When interference in causality is weakened, it requires the user to add in killing behavior to guide 'the possibility of death.' Imagining the opponent's death, twisting fate—Then ensuring it."

"The same happened to that armored soldier... too?"

Speechless, I asked Major Loki.

"Yes, I used him in order to destroy the unmanned weapon. I roped the unmanned weapon into the causality of his death."

"What... I can't believe you can go so far—"

Code Lost's power had completely surpassed my imagination. No, it was Major Loki's *application* of it that had transcended conventional rules.

Killing a person just to destroy an unmanned weapon—No ordinary person would think of that.

"Well then, we have chatted long enough... However, let me tell you something essential."

Looking at me in my surprise and confusion, Major Loki narrowed his slender eyes.

It felt like being doused with a bucket of cold water. My thoughts were reset. Warnings from my instincts blared in the depths of my ears.

Ensuring death simply through imagination—If this was true, then timing or the like would be irrelevant.

At any point in time recognized by Major Loki, fate was practically held in his hands. What could one do in such a situation?

"Hoo—Relax, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe. My Code Lost is still incomplete. It's no easy task for me to kill you, who wields the power to interfere in causality, only second to mine, and that immortal Gray. I've already tried it many times but failed in every case."

"...You already made a move huh."

I whispered painfully. Considering the possibility of death encountered when I came here, a terrible chill went through my body.

"Unconfirmable causality means that all endings have a chance to exist, no matter what kind. That's why I need insurance. It won't do unless you develop a deep understanding of Code Lost. This is to ensure that I can become the 'hero' in all possible futures."

"What... is the meaning of this...?"

The air was filled with tension. However, Major Loki answered me in a cold voice and expression.

"There is no need for you to know at the moment. Recall this and think carefully if you happen to kill me."

Saying that, he took out a gun from the inside of his military uniform. Instead of the mass-produced Nergal used by NIFL, it was an old-style revolver seldom seen on the battlefield nowadays.

"Mononobe!"

"Nii-san!"

"Yuu!"

Seeing Major Loki draw a gun, the girls called my name from behind.

But at that moment, I was the first to realize what I should be doing. After learning of Major Loki's power, I should have yelled this instantly.

"Hurry and run, everyone! Immediately—get away as far from here as possible!"

I roared with all my strength without turning my head back, staring at Major Loki the whole time.

"Mononobe-kun, but—"

"Onii-chan—"

Firill and Ren questioned this sudden order but I ignored them and repeated myself.

"Hurry—I'm begging you, run away! Run away quickly!!"

Charlotte and I were the only ones whom Major Loki could not kill by imagination. The exceptions did not include Iris or the girls. They should have noticed upon listening to me. Right now, they were in a situation where their lives could be taken any moment.

"...Let us be on our way, everyone!"

"Our presence will get in Mononobe-kun's way! Let's hurry!"

After Lisa and Ariella urged them, I heard the sound of them running.

"Yuu—You're not allowed to die!"

Mixed amidst the receding footsteps, Kili's message reached my ears.

Looking past me at the escaping girls, Major Loki smiled wryly.

"How regrettable. Code Lost has no concept of distance. Running anywhere makes no difference."

"...Are you using them as hostages?"

I glared at Major Loki and asked.

"No, that's pointless. Seeing as you are so smart, you probably know that I intend to execute them regardless, right?"

He had a point. I did not believe at all that Major Loki would spare them. Sleipnir was a unit existing for the purpose of hunting Ds. Now that I thought about it, Major Loki's hostility was not only directed at Charlotte but also all Ds.

Hence, precisely because I understood this, the cruel smile on Major Loki's face made my entire body tremble.

Rather than threatening them, he intended to follow the worst-case scenario.

"As a result, I will dispose of them first—Let their death cries serve as the signal for us to start 'killing each other.'"

"——!"

The instant I heard him, I raised Siegfried without hesitation and fired a bullet of dark matter.

"Plasma Bullet!"

I did not have luxury of waiting for him to speak. I must not give him any time to think.

Using my fastest transmutation, I attacked his heart directly by generating a bullet that a human could neither block nor evade.

However, the diamond-piercing bullet failed to interrupt his talking and thinking.

"What..."

I looked in shock at the unharmed Major Loki. Tearing through the darkness of night, the glowing bullet's trail disappeared behind him instead of striking him.

It missed—

A shot fired with lucidity at full concentration without hesitation at merely a distance of five meters—

"Nowhere good enough, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe. Currently, the gap in our causality interference power is far too great, have you forgotten? All phenomena involving random fluctuations will proceed in my favor. In other words, at this distance, *the only possibility for your bullets is to miss*. In addition—"

The corners of Major Loki's lips sneered.

"—During the time you are firing this completely pointless bullet, I can *think things slowly at my leisure*."

"No way..."

My mind went blank. A sense of despair rose up from underfoot.

My throat became parched, to the point that I did not know how to breathe. Irregular breathing affected my thoughts while my shaken heart caused my Siegfried-wielding hand to tremble nonstop.

"The deaths of all those girls are sealed."

Major Loki's calm and cruel voice delivered to my ears words I refused to believe.

I felt as though my body was sliced myriad times.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Roaring like a beast, I kicked the ground and charged.

Using the remainder of my dark matter, I created a steel knife. If bullets were blocked by the wall named probability, then my only recourse was to deliver "death" directly by these hands of mine.

"Fufu—As expected, you instinctively chose the best option."

With a confident expression, Major Loki raised his revolver at me.

Within my accelerated consciousness, I saw the line of murderous intent. Predicting the trajectory, I blocked the bullet with my knife.

Clang!!

With a high-pitched ringing and heavy impact, the blade shattered and flew apart.

The blade, which should have been strong enough, was shattered the instant the bullet struck. This was not because the bullet's power exceeded my expectations. I knew this from the sensation of the impact.

Most likely, he had "coincidentally" hit the knife's most fragile point.

"Gah—"

I felt a sharp pain in my right leg. A fragment of the broken blade had stabbed me in the leg. This was probably due to causality unfolding in Major Loki's favor too.

However, none of that mattered to me. There was no time to be intimidated by pain nor fearful of overwhelming odds.

Fight—kill—in order to *protect* the ones dearest to me!

I closed in and used my bare hand to grab the broken blade stuck in my leg. Drawing out the fragment, I stabbed at my opponent.

However, Major Loki took half a step back and evaded my attack with minimum motion. Although I immediately followed up with a backhanded strike, it missed as well.

"Indeed—Although death is sealed, it still has not arrived yet at this moment. If you were to kill me this instant, the one who has warped causality, perhaps those girls might still live."

Major Loki dodged my attacks while telling me this in a detached manner as though talking about someone else.

"——Tsk!!"

I transmuted a new knife and threw the broken blade at Major Loki's throat.

However, the blade brushed past his neck even though we were clearly less than a meter apart, flying behind him.

"Nevertheless... only ten seconds remain."

With these words, Major Loki pulled his revolver's trigger. I twisted my body to evade. The bullet's trajectory could be predicted. However, a vivid red splattered on the side of my vision. Part of the muscle on my upper arm had been gouged.

My attacks could not land yet his attacks were unavoidable.

This was presumably caused by the difference in quantity of the scrapped factor held by each of us.

Be that as it may, I must bridge the gap. Unless I rejected fate within the next ten seconds, I was going to lose the ones dearest to me.

Iris, Mitsuki, Tia, Lisa, Firill, Ren, Ariella, Kili... They were all going to die.

I refused to acknowledge it. Absolutely forbidden. This sort of future, this kind of existence that would bring about the worst outcome!

Disallowed. Must be destroyed. Must be killed.

I will—kill. Kill him!

Filled with murderous intent, my mind began to meld with "Fafnir."

But despite the acceleration of the mind and the sharpening of my senses, that former sense of omnipotence did not surface.

Predictions failing, attacks being read. In this back and forth process, I was gradually cornered.

Summoned dark matter was shot by the revolver the instant of generation, thus putting a seal on transmutation.

"Six, five—"

Major Loki counted down calmly while evading my attacks. Bit by bit, the revolver's bullets were shaving away my flesh.

Although I barely managed to avoid critical injuries, my injured body was bleeding profusely. My movements were gradually growing sluggish.

"Three, two—"

Was this it? Was this everything? Was this the best that "Fafnir," the monster occupying my heart, could do!?

If it was still not enough, I could hand over everything of mine, whatever it took. Hence—Devour this guy before my eyes!!

The only thing left was the knife in my hand.

Using this one and only fang, I will take my enemy's life. I no longer cared what was going to happen to me. Even mutual annihilation was fine.

So long as this blade met its mark, all else could—

BANG!!

A gunshot and heavy metallic sound was heard. Sent flying from my hand, the knife spun through the air.

Raising the smoking revolver, Major Loki announced calmly to me.

"—Zero."

My vision turned dark. My thoughts and heart were completely frozen.

This word declared the end to everything. A voice implying my loss of everything.

Too late. Failed to hit. Failed to protect—

Emotionally, I could not accept. But rationality forced me to confront reality.

"Ah..."

Within my heart, filled with despair, only murderous intent remained impossible to dispel, expanding and overflowing still.

Despite having lost the ones dearest to me, my body continued to fight as before.

"Gahhhhhhhhhh!!"

Hatred and anger erupted. I thrust a knifehanded strike at Major Loki's eyeball.

"Now that's what I'm talking about, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe—True killing intent painted completely with hatred and vengeance."

With a smile of contentment, he dodged my attack and aimed the revolver at me.

"—I've been waiting for this moment. To inherit your scrapped factor in its most activated state."

The gunshot shook the air—I felt a violent impact against the left side of my chest.

"Gah..."

The instant I noticed my heart had been struck, all sensory perception left me. My consciousness fell into a deep abyss of darkness.

Part 4

Throb, throb—

Why? My heartbeat was still clearly audible. The heart, which should have been destroyed, continued to pump blood through my entire body.

I felt as though I was looking at the water surface from the depths of the ocean. Submerged deeply, all I could see was blue darkness.

However, there was sound—a heartbeat and some kind of faint voice echoing.

'—What a disappointing ending, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe.'

Ripples appeared on the water surface. I heard Major Loki's voice from the abyss.

Was this a dream? A kind of kaleidoscopic flashback seen before one's death?

Although the thought crossed my mind, the heartbeat sound brought a sense of reality.

I was still alive, it told me fervently.

Then this voice was also reality... It must be a voice I was hearing in the present.

'I must have taught you that the impetuous live short lives. Asking them to flee out of your sight was an error in judgment.'

Major Loki's voice was heard again.

I felt bothered by a certain part of what he said.

Asking them to flee out of my sight was an error in judgment...?

What did he mean? It was almost like he was saying—It would be troublesome for him if I were able to check on the girls' situation...

'However... Now that I've inherited your scrapped factor, lies will also become truths. The sequence was merely reversed.'

While he continued to speak, throb—A loud and intense beat of the heart.

Lies will also become truths—

Lies? In other words... In other words, everyone was still alive?

Despite the lack of concrete evidence, there were grounds to believe so. It was possible that his words were a hallucination, but still.

Those girls, having become my kind, whom Charlotte's control was ineffective against, it was possible that they could avoid getting slaughtered by Code Lost's imagination.

Throb, throb...

However... If I died... If this beating stopped, Major Loki's power would strengthen further. Once he got closer to the complete Code Lost, he would probably be able to kill Charlotte and the girls for real.

In that case, I must not let go of this heartbeat.

I feared that Major Loki would notice immediately that he had yet to inherit the authority... The fact that my heart was still beating—

Even so, I still had not found a way to win. Standing up would only end up reenacting the previous scene.

What should I do? The power of "Fafnir" could not touch him. It was impossible to fill the gap in the quantity of the scrapped factor we each possessed. Both coincidence and fate were standing on Major Loki's side.

No—Then why was I still alive? Why on earth was my heart still pulsating...

The beating sound grew clearer and clearer.

Throb, throb—

The sound was coming from the abyss of darkness. A faint light was glowing there.

That was...

Following the light, I swam through the darkness. Next, brightness erupted instantly in my surroundings like stars.

This place, could it be—

With a particular type of premonition, I reached the source of the heartbeat sounds. What I saw there were golden particles vibrating along with the pulse.

Right, this was where the mental conversation had taken place between Ariella and me. Then surely, this must be the lingering remnants of the Ether Wind generated from that time.

They were still... in my body huh?

What the Ether Wind enveloped was probably my heart.

The human heart was located in the left chest rather than inside the brain. Hence, that was why people placed their hand on their chest as a gesture to indicate themselves—To express I am "here."

In other words, Ether Wind remaining in the "heart," where spiritual density was the highest, had protected the heart organ... Probably something like that.

It was practically a miracle—No, wait. There were no miracles in front of Major Loki. Probabilities were all skewed in his favor and phenomena would not be affected by uncertainties—Unless "inevitable," developments could not possibly unfold in my favor.

Besides, the fact that instantly disappearing Ether Wind had lingered in my body was in itself abnormal.

Then why—?

With questions, I extended my hand towards the light. At that moment, golden particles flew and scattered, accompanied by an intense pulse.

The light in the darkness gradually weakened. Watching it vanish—I noticed.

...Wrong. These particles were not remnants. They were freshly generated.

Flashes of insight formed a chain as I reached the conclusion with lightning speed.

—Right, Hraesvelgr's authority had always been *here*... Ever since the moment I inherited it—

There was no better location than the "heart" for a soul-manifesting authority to reside in.

It was the same for Iris, successors of authorities were able to generate effects directly without relying on dark matter.

According to Vritra, Mitsuki and I could only rely on dark matter transmutation because of incomplete inheritance or power suppression to avoid dragonifying as a result of surpassing human boundaries.

Residing inside my heart, Hraesvelgr's authority must have been generating Ether Wind continuously while keeping within limits to prevent me from transforming.

Then conversely... If I could use the authority on the same scale as the original, *I would tend towards a dragon more*.

At the current stage, neither Charlotte's dominance nor Code Lost were effective against me, which implied that I was already beyond human.

If I were to take a step further—

I reached out to the golden color, praying strongly.

For the present, even if just for this instant, surpass human boundaries and generate the maximum amount of Ether Wind!

What I desired was the power to oppose Major Loki—that belonging to a monster capable of trampling humans directly without any words wasted.

Inevitability that would paint everything the same color.

—Throb.

The pulsing golden particles gathered towards my hand, taking on the shape of a spear.

From the abyss of my consciousness, I looked out to the water surface afar. Raising the golden spear—I cried out with my soul.

"Ether Bullet!!"

Bursting out, the flood of dazzling particles crossed the boundary of consciousness, then—

I opened my eyes, surrounded by the color of gold.

Supposed to have collapsed, my body was still standing on two legs. Rather than trying my hardest to stand on a wounded leg, I was simply imagining myself in a standing state.

My entire body was enveloped in dazzling Ether Wind.

Normally speaking, a materialized soul would be locked inside the physical body, unable to move.

But right now, I was able to move my body using my mind. The spirit currently enveloped the flesh. As far as I knew, there was only one such lifeform.

The yellow dragon—"Yellow" Hraesvelgr.

This authority apparently altered the mind instead of the body.

Standing in the same realm as that giant golden bird, I looked at the surprised Major Loki before me.

"2nd Lieutenant Mononobe... You—"

He instantly raised his revolver and pulled the trigger.

However, the fired bullet was deflected by the spirit enveloping my body. Physical interference was completely useless against a materialized mind. No matter what possibilities were attempted, none of them included a future where I was shot.

My victory was inevitable.

Using my mind to animate my body felt easier and faster than ever be before.

This was due to skipping the process of transmitting orders from the brain to the muscles, even achieving reaction times faster than natural reflexes.

Major Loki stared in shock as I instantly charged into his chest.

I raised my arm that was covered by concentrated particles.

—Killing is wrong.

In that instant, Iris' voice flashed through my mind. I remembered the sensation of our pinky promise.

However, I yelled out to dispel my hesitation and swung my arm down.

"AHHHHHHHHHH!!"

Apart from taking his life, there were no other choices to stop someone like him who could kill others simply by imagining it.

Sorry, Iris... This will be the last time.

The color of red splattered in this golden world.

Enveloped in Ether Wind, my hand stabbed into Major Loki's body with almost no resistance at all.

"Hoo—"

Major Loki smiled while spitting blood from his mouth. Losing strength, his body leaned against me.

"You win... 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe."

Major Loki whispered hoarsely into my ear.

I felt perplexed by his emotions that were being conveyed by the Ether Wind, namely, slight regret with immense *satisfaction*.

"Major... Loki...?"

"Don't worry... Either side is fine. Regardless, the outcome will be the same."

The Ether Wind I had generated beyond my limit gradually dispersed. The spirit coating surrounding my body thinned out. The living sensation of blood and flesh returned to my body.

"My factor... will be inherited by you. Next, you will kill every human you know... Just kill Gray along with the rest of them."

"What are you talking about—"

A loathsome sense of foreboding. Major Loki's composure and his words made me feel intensely disturbed.

"Gah.. Ah!"

Major Loki kept coughing. The flowing of fresh blood made my shoulder wet and warm.

"...Hoo... To be able to kill just by thinking it... If this power were to continue increasing... What would happen, you do understand, right...?"

His words brought an intense chill running through my body.

"You will... kill every human you know... That is the kind of monster you'll become... Shouldering the responsibility of the awakened authority... understanding true murderous intent, you... will have no means to suppress the power... You want to imitate the first Fafnir... walking... along a path of murdering no one...? No chance... for you now."

With a feeble voice, Major Loki spoke words sounding like a curse.

"...You... will kill Gray... After inheriting her authority... you will surely commit suicide... then... without any successor, the authority... will be lost... in an incomplete state... like in the past as... with Code Lost... Thereupon, humanity shall find freedom once more..."

His voice was already hard to hear clearly. Still, I was able to understand what he wanted me to do afterwards. Having said the outcome will be the same, he—

"...Of course... monsters like us... can only do evil... as humans... hence 'Fafnir'... must be slain... This is... as a 'hero'..."

"Why do you have to go this far?"

I could not accept it. Major Loki mustered the last of his strength to answer.

"Wanting to actualize the meaning of my birth... What's wrong with that?"

These were his final words.

Going limp completely, Major Loki's body slid to the ground.

After I let go, his body lost balance entirely and fell over.

However, there was no time for me to react emotionally to his death.

"—!?"

A frightening chill ran through my body. This was murderous intent directed at *myself*.

—Die.

Merged with me, having become a part of me, "Fafnir" expanded, beginning to devour my consciousness.

—Die, die die die.

What is this? This pitch-black emotion.

This was definitely not my own killing intent. The "Fafnir" within me... The scrapped factor lamented.

Evidently, killing intent directed at humanity was the authority's true form—

As my thoughts reached this point, I noticed, this was most likely the case.

This was... *the world's intent to kill, directed at humanity*.

Taking a massive explosion of hostility towards mankind, which had used the unstoppable force of violence known as civilization to wipe out huge numbers of other species and even going as far as to alter the world, then condensing this hostility into killing intent, the origin of an authority was the result.

The first Fafnir must have sensed the same thing. After knowing the authority's true form, it was only natural that he refrained from using the authority for the rest of his life.

This power was a self-destruct device handed over to humanity. Once killing intent was directed towards anyone, the authority itself would erupt with killing intent towards all of humanity, thereby achieving total extermination.

Hence—I must not think.

Pressing on my chest, I desperately suppressed this killing intent that did not belong to me.

If I were to think of anyone, that person would be killed simply through my imagination.

—Die die die die die die!

At this rate, sure enough, I would have no choice but to commit suicide. However, I hastily changed my mind.

No good. Directing killing intent at myself could cause the authority to run amok.

But there was ultimately a limit to how long I could hold this in. Once someone was killed—when the people I protected were gone—I would probably choose suicide.

Everything was happening as Major Loki had said.

No other paths. No existing options. But...

"Giving up... No way in hell."

I gritted my teeth to resist the overflowing killing intent and turned my back against Major Loki's dead body.

In a situation where one was unable to stop oneself, it was impossible for me to alter destiny on my own.

However, what about others apart from me—"those girls"...

Forbidding myself to imagine any of their faces, I dragged my heavy body and forced myself to walk.

Chapter 4 - Successor of Genocide

Part 1

—What am I doing?

Charlotte B. Lord thought to herself amidst pain that was tearing her body apart.

Unlike her father, she did not feel an obligation to "protect the world no matter what."

However, she still followed in her father's footsteps, choosing the path of the sovereign over mankind. This was the "meaning" of her survival with Mica.

She had instantly understood the true nature of the authority as soon as she inherited it. Born to unite the human race, this power must not be used except at a minimal level. Hence, she copied her father's method of ruling the human world.

Conferring super recovery powers and immunity to disease, preventing all manner of death except old age and severe injuries—Using this as the price, she made others obey her wishes within a feasible extent. By establishing this type of contract with the world's ruling class, she slowly conquered the world.

As much as possible, she refrained from invoking her authority to totally control other people's personalities and bodies unless absolutely necessary. To avoid backlash from humans, she also eschewed direct involvement in the world's operation.

She exercised unilateral authority and stood in the spotlight only once. That was the occasion when Midgard gained independence as an autonomous educational institute.

Why had she done so?

Most likely because she had felt a strong sense of empathy.

For these Type Dragon girls, Ds, whose lives were distorted by a power bestowed upon them without consent—

Then after much effort spent, Midgard, now set on a new path as an academy, became an irreplaceable home for her.

However, humans were very crafty creatures.

People tended to show openings when they gained things they held dear, things they wanted to protect. Never missing out on such weaknesses, humans would exploit them thoroughly.

It was not rare for them to use Midgard as leverage to make forceful demands. The current incident was simply one case that had developed into an extreme situation.

—In any case, what they wanted was to *use* me as a tool.

Amidst her hazy consciousness, Charlotte looked up at the high ceiling and laughed wryly.

For the sake of eternal peace and stability—While delivering what sounded like grand speeches of righteousness, rulers sought a world where they could persist as winners.

'We would be troubled if the weak did not remain weak and the poor did not remain poor. Otherwise, we could not stay as winners forever.'

Charlotte felt as though she heard their true thoughts.

However, it was true that the world was facing the risk of a war crisis. Left unchecked, it would cause many casualties. If humans were to use weapons that would cause drastic changes to the environment, they could very well walk a path of self-destruction.

To prevent what her father's efforts from becoming futile, she had no choice but to use her authority this way. More importantly, she was forced to accept when the other party threatened her using law proposals unfavorable to Ds and Midgard's various rights as bargaining chips.

Naturally, she could have overrode everything by invoking her authority.

However, when controlling a person, one would have to control others to prevent that first person's betrayal. This would lead to an endless cycle resulting in vast quantities of humans under her control.

Were she to use such a move, there would be no way to restrain her power.

Hence, Charlotte decided to respect the demands and decisions of humans.

However, this provoked NIFL and brought in the current incident.

Using her authority to clean up the mess, she had now lost control and was even getting her own side caught up under dominance as well.

In hindsight, the one who wanted to protect Midgard the most, Charlotte herself, was actually the one who exposed it to danger.

—Seriously, what am I doing?

Although she had definitely done something wrong, she did not know where exactly she had made a mistake.

And she could not think of a solution to rectify her error either.

Most likely, she had become powerless to change the current situation since a while ago. Hence, all she could do was entrust everything to someone other than herself.

Only one face surfaced in Charlotte's mind.

From the very instant when she first laid eyes on that young man, Charlotte had felt that they were "the same."

It was the face of the one who treated her as an equal, her most precious friend.

Part 2

Don't come, don't come, don't come—Don't come over.

I recited at my left hand's dragon mark while moving forward.

Like during the battle against Sleipnir, I placed my faith in our bonds as kindred to transmit my thoughts—Hence, I persisted in crying out in my heart.

Right now, what I feared most was the girls appearing before my eyes.

The calamitous killing intent surging forth from the depths of my consciousness was thirsting for targets to vent at. No matter how much I

valued the other person, the authority itself would probably bare its fangs the moment they came into sight.

Hence, to avoid seeing others, I kept my eyes shut while advancing.

Although I kept tripping over what might be debris, I still managed to pass through the damaged front gate to keep going smoothly.

According to the Academy map in my mind, I was currently at the road where I had passed through earlier. Even if I were to lose my direction, I could adjust my course by touch as long as I carefully confirmed the feeling underfoot.

Were things as I predicted? So far, I had not met a single person on my way here.

Immediately... I was going to reach the clock tower.

Near the entrance should be that person... who was probably a collapsed member of staff.

To avoid being aware of people, I kept my eyes tightly shut. Even if voices were to call out to me, my plan was to keep going while pretending not to hear.

Were things unfolding completely according to my wishes... Or were my companions actively "making this happen"? ...Although I had no idea, so far no one called out to stop me along my successful journey to the clock tower's entrance.

With my hand against a wall, I cautiously entered the clock tower. While taking are not to pass through the location of the collapsed staff, I moved along the wall and used my fingertips to search for the elevator button.

The elevator had apparently stayed on this floor after we used it. The doors opened immediately with a thunk.

I entered the elevator and leaned against the wall, waiting for the doors to shut themselves. When I heard the thunk sound again and determined that I was now in a sealed room, I finally opened my eyes and pressed the button for the top floor.

"Huff... Huff..."

After that, I sat on the floor, panting.

I was almost at my limit in suppressing my killing intent. Physically, my body was also in quite a poor state.

Although the gun wounds from Major Loki were not critical, I had lost chunks of flesh from my arms and legs. Having soaked all the bleeding, my clothing became heavy. Pushing against the floor for support, my hand was stained red from blood.

The pain had almost reached saturation, stimulating my consciousness continuously. It would be far easier to move my body by wrapping myself in Ether Wind as earlier, but I did not know how to do it intentionally.

Perhaps it was like latent potential exploding at the scene of a fire, an ability usable after the limiters were subconsciously removed. However... Even if I solved this problem, all it would achieve was nothing more than moving my body.

To resolve the fundamental problem, I still needed other power.

Ding, with the sound of a lively tone, I reached the floor of my destination. I closed my eyes before the doors opened and used my weakened legs to stand up unsteadily.

"Guh..."

Leaning against the wall while exiting the elevator, I searched for surrounding presences. The cold corridor was silent with no one apparently present.

Of my companions, three of them had remained on this floor... However, they were staying in the principal's private room even further in. They probably would not come out if they were there.

With my eyes closed, I continued to move forward. The sensation on my fingertips changed. This was the feeling of wood—The door to the principal's office.

I opened the door without knocking. There was no time to waste on idle chatter. The more talking, the more I would recognize the other person's existence and the higher the risk of Code Lost erupting.

Hence, if I had to convey what was necessary in less than a sentence...

After entering the room, I was greeted by an intense smell of blood.

Was the window open? I sensed a faint breeze. But in spite of that, the smell of blood did not dissipate. I approached the source of the scent, by "her" side.

What I heard was faint and painful panting. She was the only one in the room. Although I could not confirm with my eyes closed, my target should be sitting in her office chair as usual.

Right now, she was the only one I could count on.

More precisely, there was someone else who was able to carry out the same measures as her... But there was no way I could impose such a cruel task to that innocent and single-minded little girl.

This task—I could only hand over to my *friend*.

After taking a deep breath lightly, I voiced my wish.

"Control me."

"Kill me."

However, our voices overlapped. She had spoken at virtually the same time.

"..."

"..."

After this curious coincidence, we were plunged into an awkward and painful silence. But if this continued, it would be impossible to resume the earlier subject. Neither did we have time to waste.

I carefully tried my best to suppress my awareness of her while speaking in the darkness.

"Right now, I can kill people indiscriminately just by imagining it. Suppressing my killing intent with everything I can is already reaching a limit. So... Control my mind and stop me completely from thinking."

While taking care not to direct my killing intent at her, I explained the situation.

This was the only method I could come up with to salvage the current situation. The girl who had succeeded Yggdrasil was also capable of controlling my thoughts, but she was surely unable to erase "me."

Hence, I requested the help of the girl who was my friend. However, a hoarse voice replied.

"Sorry... I'm almost at my limit too. Unable to control excessive blood, I'm currently starting to control people indiscriminately. Although it's a bit embarrassing... My plan was evidently too naive. By this point, all I can do is ask you to terminate my life."

Hearing that, I grew anxious. Although I had offered earlier to aid her if she were to fall into a dire situation, I actually never expected her control of her authority to develop to such a dangerous state.

She was definitely going to fine, that was what I was subconsciously hoping for.

"No... Wait a sec. Things will really be bad unless you control me. Worse comes to worst, this island... no, perhaps the entire human race will be destroyed—"

"The same applies in my case too. Using the bodies of the controlled, the blood will multiply on its own. At this rate, the entire human race's 'minds' will be wiped out."

With this exchange, I understood. Both of us were already standing at the very verge of destroying mankind.

"Is there no... other way? You can still hang in there a while, so just a bit longer... Umm, use willpower."

"...No. Things will only worsen at this rate. You too... If you can still endure, then do your best to endure for a while. You're not such a weakling of a man that you'll lose to your own authority. Make use of willpower. Willpower."

"If I could do that... I wouldn't need to ask you for this favor."

I sighed and sat on the floor. I could no longer stand.

Next, I heard the chair sliding then footsteps approaching me. The irregular thud of steps gradually circled around to my back—

Accompanied by a faint sound of clothing friction, I felt a warm sensation against my back.

It was probably coming from her slender back.

"Me... too. I wouldn't have to ask you do this if there was another way."

Leaning back to back against me, she spoke in a weary voice.

"But—after knowing what favor you're asking, if I don't do my best... It'll be the end of humanity."

Since I did not have to worry about her entering my view, I opened my eyes and answered.

Just as I thought the window was open with the curtains swaying in the wind. However, the room was filled with a thick mist of blood that the wind could not disperse.

"In that case, I'll leave it to you to do your best."

"I hope you can muster your sense of duty as the principal."

"That's something... I don't have. All I harbor is my love for beautiful girls."

"...Man, you're totally unshakable."

I smiled wryly and looked up at the ceiling. The back of my head touched her hair lightly.

"Look at you, unreliable despite clearly being my friend."

"...That's the way friends are. No way they can be reliable."

"Says the guy who was still asking me for a favor just now."

"Haha... Yeah."

After I laughed and answered calmly, she chuckled too.

"So... My friend."

"What's up?"

"Since it's not going to work if any of us don't do our best... Wouldn't it be fair if we both work our hardest together?"

"...Me too, exactly what I'm thinking."

"Can you do it?"

"Until now... I thought I couldn't."

"What about now?"

"Incredibly, I feel driven to do my best now."

Rather than putting on a brave front, I was voicing my true feelings.

"What a coincidence... Me too. It feels a bit easier now."

"You too, Charl?"

I finally called her name but no change apparently came to her. Well, I suppose it was already like this ever since the conversation began.

However, if this mutual sensation was not simply a matter of feeling more at ease—

"Oh, I'm guessing it's the power of our friendship."

"I'm guessing not."

"...That's so cold of you. Couldn't you play along?"

Charlotte sulked but I shook my head.

"What I'm trying to say is that there might be some kind of concrete reason for this."

"Concrete reason?"

"Yeah... Even just by chatting like this, I'm sure Code Lost is already trying to affect you, Charl. Likewise, your authority is probably already trying to control me."

"Well, you have a point... I probably can't even control the blood mist here properly."

Charlotte spoke in self-deprecation.

"That's why, isn't it because of each other's authority that we're having an easier time now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Charl, the multiplying blood is like a part of you, right? My authority is killing them continuously... And your authority is controlling and suppressing my overflowing intent to kill. If you think of it that way, isn't that the reason why we're feeling more at ease? Proof that your control is being applied... Look, my wounds have healed by the time I noticed."

After I shared my opinion, I heard an emotional breath.

"Oh? So the authorities are resisting each other. In that case, if we can just wait for the problem to solve itself like this?"

"Well... I don't know what will happen. It's currently a state of balance because our powers are suppressing each other. If one of us goes over the limit and loses consciousness, it's all over."

"Hoo... It's not that easy after all."

Through my back, I felt her shrugging.

"However, this buys us time to find a solution. And right now—"

"While ye authorities are locked in a struggle, 'tis possible for us to carry out a dialogue."

Hearing the voice coming from the side, I looked over there in surprise.

The door at the back of the office, leading to the private room, had opened halfway without me noticing. A young girl, roughly two sizes smaller than Kili, was standing before the door.

"Vritra..."

With bated breath, I spoke the name of the girl—However, a purple-haired girl rushed out past her and ran over.

"Papa!!"

"—D-Don't come over!"

I frantically stopped Shion.

Hearing me yell loudly, Shion instantly halted with tears slowly appearing in her eyes. Seeing her like that, Vritra sighed.

"Know that she will cry if thou rejectest her thus. She has been crying nonstop ever since Jeanne Hortensia fell unconscious, 'twas no easy task to calm her down... Waste not mine efforts."

"No, but—"

"Ye authorities are locked in a mutual struggle, yes? In that case, thou shouldst attempt to place thy murderous intent towards this young child under complete control."

After listening to Vritra, I turned my gaze back to Shion who looked like she was about to cry.

True... I could not direct killing intent at someone like her, I must not.

I took a deep breath to calm my emotions then smiled at Shion.

"—Sorry, Shion."

As I apologized and spread my arms for her, Shion happily rushed into my embrace.

Jeanne fainting must have unsettled her greatly. She wrapped her arms tightly around the back my neck.

"Papa... Papa...!"

"There there."

In the end, to comfort Shion who was about to cry, I gently stroked her back.

With a weary expression, Vritra approached.

"—This stand-in of mine is equipped with excellent optical and auditory sensory capabilities. I heard everything ye said through the door and saw the battle outside through the window from beginning to end. Upon this foundation, I retract what I had said to thee previously. Mayhap thou art truly Neun."

With her hand on her chest, Vritra stared intently at me.

"What are you talking about so suddenly...?"

"Thou used Hraesvelgr's authority earlier yet returned to normal despite the transformation. For one to be marked by another dragon yet undergo no alteration in appearance, 'tis an impossible phenomenon. Since 'tis impossible, chances are high that some authority is at work here. *Immutability* itself could be part of an ability."

Vritra seemed a bit displeased in tone. She pointed at my forehead.

"Be that as it may... What troubleth thee at present is an authority that was bestowed upon humanity to begin with. Thou art unable to suppress the authority by rejecting transformation. Even if thou art Neun, that power will still perform its duty."

This time, Vritra pointed at my forehead with subtle delight.

"...What the heck are you trying to say?"

I inquired of Vritra who had casually changed the subject. Next, she puffed out her chest as though to boast.

"Kukuku, in other words—'Tis thanks to me that thou shalt be saved hereafter, not because thou art Neun."

"Huh...?"

Vritra just said I'll be saved, right?

Did I hear correctly? I looked questioningly at her.

"Art thou not in possession of multiple vessels identical to thyself? 'Tis one right before thee. Since thou art unable to hold the authority, then give it away."

Saying that, Vritra looked at Shion who was hugging me tightly.

"You're telling me to give it to Shion—"

"Indeed—The core of my plan to multiply the counterdragons and the dragonification system I created is to allow more individuals to share an authority. Since forcible suppression is impossible, thou couldst pass on the authority."

Vritra nodded proudly.

This was an unexpected breakthrough. In the current situation, it was the only way to escape the crisis.

However... I was filled with doubt while in contact with this crying child's delicate body.

"Passing this pitch-black killing intent to Shion... No way. Even if it's shared between two people, half each, it might still distort personalities."

For a child whose psyche had yet to mature, this influence would be extremely pronounced. Perhaps even half the authority would still run amok.

"Hmm... Now is not the time for thee to speak such words."

Vritra pouted and glared disapprovingly at me.

She was very correct, but despite being correct—

"In that case, just have more people share the burden."

At this moment, a voice came from outside the window. A gust of strong wind caused the curtains to billow fiercely. The red mist of blood was blown and dispersed.

Standing behind the lifted curtain—on the wide balcony—were my companions.

"All of you..."

I gasped in surprise. Although I knew they should still be alive, it was a great relief to personally see them alright.

"Goodness gracious... We had to hide and wait simply because you said 'don't come over.' Yet clearly in spite of that, you did not summon us when you needed our help... Having exhausted our patience, we hurried over."

Her long blonde hair fluttering, Lisa stepped into the room gallantly.

"Nii-san, we fully understand the situation now. Since the authority cannot be held by a single person, please entrust this to us too."

Next, Mitsuki spoke decisively.

"Mononobe-kun, I've held a lot of the scrapped factor before, so don't worry about giving me a bigger share. Let me and you be responsible for the lion's share, then spread the rest of the authority across everyone else. Oh, except Shion, of course."

Ariella suggested while approaching me, then she placed her hand on Shion who was still hugging me.

"Umm, Ariella... Whether or not it can be controlled this precisely... Or rather, the method to share out an authority, I still have no idea how to do it..."

While I was worrying, Ren and Firill made thumbs-up gestures.

"Don't worry... Onii-chan, you'll surely succeed."

"Mononobe-kun, do your best."

"But... It's not just about Shion, this might have a bad effect on you girls too—"

Despite their encouragement, I still could not dispel the hesitation in my heart.

"Yuu, believe in Tia and everyone!"

"That's right, Mononobe! We are already 'the same' as you. You have to stop worrying and trust us!"

Tia and Iris insisted strongly. However, I noticed that one person was absent.

"Um, where's Kili?"

"Kili said she had something to do then ran off who knows where."

Tia answered my question then Iris added:

"But I'm sure Kili-chan feels the same as us!"

"...Rather, she would want to join in together."

Firill remarked quietly and everyone nodded in agreement.

Next, everyone looked at me as though seeking my answer.

Since they had all made themselves clear, I could no longer say anything pessimistic. I mustered my determination and looked at everyone in turn.

"I got it... Then please lend me your aid, everyone."

"Mononobe..."

Iris' expression relaxed in relief.

Next, a voice spoke up behind me, timing at the end of our conversation.

"My friend—In that case, our duties are confirmed."

"...Charl?"

I turned to face her.

"Since your authority can be controlled, kill me—With that, everything will be resolved."

Charlotte spoke matter-of-factly and sighed in resignation. However, I could not accept her suggestion.

"I refuse."

"What...? D-Do you really understand? Once your authority is shared out and weakened, the current stalemate will end. With that, there will be nothing left to keep me in check, you know? Nothing more can be done using spirit and determination."

Charlotte pleaded tensely but I shook my head.

"'Nothing more can be done' only applied to just now. Since the struggle between authorities can reduce stress... It must be possible to *create conditions for you to keep hanging in there*, Charl. So please, keep it up a bit longer."

After refuting Charlotte, I put down Shion and stood up.

"...Papa?"

"Can you go check on Jeanne? I'm worried about her collapsed in the room alone."

I made my request in a gentle tone of voice. Shion smiled and nodded.

"gOt it."

After watching Shion run over to Charlotte's room, I extended my left hand towards Iris and the girls.

"Then let's try to share the authority first. Can everyone extend their hands here?"

"Yes!"

Iris was the first to put her hand on top of mine. The rest followed.

Since thoughts could be transmitted from a distance, perhaps this sort of direct contact was actually pointless—Oh well, this was a matter of feeling.

Imagining Kili's hand, currently absent, stacked on top, I closed my eyes.

Vritra interjected at this moment.

"Originally, the transformation of the physical body is intimately linked to the authority. Hence, the sharing of the authority was achieved by remodeling the mate's body. However, thou retained thy outer appearance despite inheriting an authority. Consequently, 'tis likely that thy mates, who have transformed into the same kind, do not share thy authority."

"Then... What should I do?"

Keeping my eyes closed, I asked Vritra.

"Thou shouldst imagine a form for the power then consciously pass it to others. As members of the same kind sharing the same nature, *intermingling* ought to be easy."

Following her advice, I began to picture the killing intent that did not belong to me, restless in my heart.

Major Loki had said previously, Code Lost was the "lethal gold" that only killed humans.

What I imagined was a dragon embracing gold with a pair of massive wings. With our hearts connected, I passed the dragon's calamitous gold to the others.

First... I began with Ariella.

Reducing the gold weighing down within me, I handed my overflowing killing intent to Ariella.

This feeling was similar to pouring water into a container. Choosing the moment just as Ariella's container was about to fill up, I slowly passed the remainder to the others.

Next, I clearly felt less burdened. The voice of killing intent weighing down my thoughts gradually grew quieter.

With this, it was possible to—

When my authority had weakened to the point that it became controllable, I separated our hands.

"Eh... It's over already?"

A "that's all?" expression was hanging on Iris' face.

"It feels like nothing has changed..."

Head tilted, Mitsuki was looking at her hand.

"Indeed..."

"I didn't feel anything intense either."

"...Mm."

Similarly, Lisa and the girls showed disappointment in their expressions. However, Ariella solemnly placed her hand on her chest.

"I feel... I've changed a lot—Or rather, it feels like going back to the way I was. Although I'm still afraid to pick up a weapon... But since I've become the same as you, Mononobe-kun, I don't dislike it either."

Ariella spoke shyly. I jumped in surprise.

It looked like Ariella and I were the only ones conscious of the authority. Since the amount passed onto the others was quite small, they had not felt any changes.

Such perfect control was beyond my imagination. Since I had intentionally excluded Shion, she was probably unaffected.

"Eh— ...Tia clearly am happy to become the same as Yuu too."

To comfort Tia who was showing displeasure, I stroked her head.

"Don't say that. This is fine. Also, I've got another favor to ask you and the other, Tia."

After saying that, I looked at Charlotte who was now suffering more than before.

One more thing—Once I rescued her, it would be the first time for me to escape the rails that Major Loki had laid.

"What do you... intend to do? I'm really... at my limit already."

Charlotte warned me hoarsely.

"Charl, the reason why you can't control your authority is because the blood has increased too much. In that case, you'll be able to regain control once we dispose of the blood covering the entire island, right?"

After hearing my reply of a question, Charlotte opened her eyes slightly.

"Well... It's true that will work... but... my blood will regenerate instantly to multiply. Even if the blood can be blown away instantly, judging from the total amount..."

"That's why I want to eliminate the blood *completely*. It's possible if we use Mitsuki's antimatter and my anti-dragon weapons."

"No... That's too much trouble—"

Charlotte showed a grim expression. At this moment, Tia forcefully raised her hand.

"Wait! Tia has a better idea for this!"

"Tia-san...?"

Lisa responded in confusion, prompting Tia to smile at her in return and thump her own chest in confidence.

"Tia will help out as *Yggdrasil*. Although Tia can *make it* personally now, using its power properly will definitely be hard—That's why husband should be the one to do it!"

Part 3

Waves were breaking against the concrete pier. Looking past the damaged portion of Midgardsormr, one could see NIFL's fleet on the other side.

Dawn was approaching with a slight white glow on the horizon. Twinkling stars should be in the night sky, but were impossible to see from below due to the red mist of blood covering us.

What we needed to do next would be best served by a wide-open space with good visibility. Hence, we left the clock and went to Midgard's harbor.

"Tia—I'm counting on you."

I took a deep breath and reached out to Tia. Standing behind, watching over us nervously were our companions.

"Don't worry, Yuu. Tia won't take anything from husband."

Smiling, Tia held my hand tightly. A flash of electricity exploded near the horns on her forehead.

Closing her red eyes, she spoke words like an incantation.

"Akashic Record—Connected. Searching for information regarding the second dragon, 'Ultimate Wisdom' Atlantis—Opening weaponry data. Anti-dragon weapon Marduk... Confirming unreleased data. Download... Start."

This was the connection to Yggdrasil that I had experienced a number of times so far.

However, it did not feel unpleasant or give me a headache this time. Currently, I did not feel the terror of having my memories eroded either.

Tia transmitted information while making sure not to increase the strain on my brain. The form of the impossible weapon, which I had created multiple times so far, was further approaching completion inside my mind.

While entrusting everything to Tia, I comprehended the outline of this new power.

Indeed, its scale was not something I could create on my own. However, as long as everyone did it together, it was possible.

"—Complete. Disconnecting."

The download of weapon data finished at last with Tia's announcement.

"How is it... Yuu? Can you use it?"

"Yeah, it's a bit big in scale, but there's no problem. Also, judging from the current situation, the bigger the better."

Looking at the red mist of blood covering Midgard, I smiled back at Tia.

"Wonderful! Then Tia will give Yuu dark matter next!"

"Then let us do the same together. Nii-san, all yours."

Mitsuki placed her hand on my shoulder.

"Mononobe, take my dark matter—Receive all of it!"

"The principal is at her limit. Failure is not an option."

"My prince won't fail. That's that."

"Mm, Onii-chan is reliable in key moments."

"Mononobe-kun, I believe in you."

Following Mitsuki, everyone touched me.

Using the massive amount of dark matter flowing into me, I transmuted matter according to the blueprints in my mind.

Through the almost complete data and what Tia had told me earlier, I understood Marduk's true form.

Marduk was what Atlantis, the ancestors of humans, had created as a counterweapon to oppose hostile entities from other worlds.

Hence, every piece of weaponry possessed enough power to rival world authorities along with special effects corresponding to respective threats.

Leviathan, controlling repulsive fields, Vritra, whose main body was located in a higher dimension, Hraesvelgr, which could not be attacked by physical means—using their own power, Atlantis created countermeasures to resist these lifeforms.

And right now, this crisis in front of us... could be opposed using this power!

"Hyperspace reversion rocket-assisted artillery—Abyss!"

Flowing out into the air like bubbles, dark matter traced out its outline.

What materialized was a breathtaking gigantic rectangular box. Although it did not feature a long barrel like previous weapons, the box held within itself a massive quantity of destructive weaponry.

This box was a launcher containing a large number of warheads—a missile pod.

I aimed this weapon, which was connected to my consciousness, at the red night sky.

Then I unleashed the power sealed in the box.

"Full fire!!"

Bang bang bang bang bang bang—

The lids of destruction opened together, launching countless missiles into the sky.

Leaving white vapor trails, the missiles scattered in the sky and detonated simultaneously at coordinates I had preset in advance.

BOOOOOOOOOM!!

Countless "holes" opened up in the red sky.

Abyss was a disintegration weapon that forcibly created hyperspace that was not supposed to exist at the same spatial coordinates, thereby causing the world's corrective force to erase everything at those points together with the surroundings.

No matter how powerful the red blood mist's ability to regenerate and multiply, it was irrelevant in the face of complete eradication.

Piercing the sky with black spots with glowing outlines, countless holes began to implode successively.

Impossibly superimposed spaces were crushed by the world—disappearing together with the light.

Sucked into these holes of self-imploding space, the red mist of blood disappeared.

It was almost as though the world was ridding itself of foreign entities. Coming into view on the other side of the devoured and torn canopy of red was a deep blue.

In the sky that had turned clear, stars were twinkling delicately.

"The red is gone from the sky!"

Tia cried out happily and everyone exclaimed.

"The mist has entirely vanished as far as the eye can see!"

"The remainder is up to the principal."

Lisa and Firill commented. They were looking at the clock tower in the island's center.

"—Believe in Charl. It'll definitely be fine."

"Yes... That's right, Mononobe. Oh, but there's something I've been very curious about..."

For some reason, Iris was looking up at me shyly.

"What is it?"

I asked in response, prompting Iris to speak with determination.

"Umm... Mononobe, when did you start calling the principal Charl?"

"Uh..."

Incidentally, it was a promise to address her that way when we were alone, but without thinking, I used it in front of others.

"Oh, actually... I am very curious too."

After Firill nodded, Lisa also looked at me while scratching her cheek.

"Me too... I wanted to ask as soon as I heard it."

"Nii-san, although I intended to discuss it properly with you alone later... Now that the issue has been raised, please explain here and now."

Mitsuki urged me to explain in a business-like manner.

"Well, it's just as friends—"

I explained in a panic but at that moment, a strange sound was heard.

Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiin—

A high-pitched ringing was coming from somewhere.

"Onii-chan, there...!"

Ren clutched my shirt from the side and pointed at the sea.

Following her indicated direction, I saw a blinding light on the other side of Midgardsormr's damaged partitions.

"The ship's prow... is glowing?"

Ariella narrowed her eyes and murmured in surprise.

Just as she described, the light was coming from one of the battleships in the fleet. From the prow of the biggest battleship.

"That ship... Somehow, it feels similar."

Tia said in a troubled voice.

"Similar to what?"

When Iris asked for an explanation, Tia replied stiffly.

"A weapon from Atlantis... Marduk..."

"What—?"

I felt an intense chill together with surprise.

'Wanting to actualize the meaning of my birth... What's wrong with that?'

Delivered with resolve prepared to forsake his own life, Major Loki's words flashed through my mind.

Judging from the battleship's size and location, it was probably their flagship. But Major Loki was already dead while the others were under Charlotte's control. There should be no one to operate the battleship.

Come to think of it, it was probably a preset command executed by autonomous machinery.

As for why he did this... As a precaution in case all his other plans failed.

"Major Loki—How deeply did you think about the worst-case scenario?"

I gritted my teeth and recounted the bitter thoughts in my heart.

Developments still remained under his control despite having unfolded to this point.

I had succeeded in restraining Code Lost and putting the situation under control without killing Charlotte, yet still I could not escape his control.

"Yuu, if it's a weapon similar to Marduk, that part is the main cannon!"

Tia warned anxiously.

Main cannon—and that type of thing was aimed at Midgard. I did not know its firepower, but if handled poorly, Midgard could very well be obliterated.

The other side's objective was probably to destroy evidence by erasing Midgard and exterminating the Ds. My spine trembled at how obsessed Major Loki was with leaving behind the achievements of a "hero," even when all his plans failed.

"I'll deploy a repulsive field to deflect the trajectory! So everyone, give me your dark matter again—"

"No good! Main cannon is Babel, relying on a repulsive field won't stop it!"

Tia interrupted me and cried out.

I remembered. Marduk's main cannon, Babel, had been the decisive weapon in defeating Leviathan. An imperfect repulsive field was not going to hold.

"T-Then we have to destroy it before it fires!"

Saying that, Iris summoned her fictional armament, but Lisa reached out to stop her.

"Hold on! There must be many people still on the battleship!"

"Umm—"

Iris went pale and stopped.

What to do—

I racked my brain furiously to think. If I borrowed the girls' aid to generate a large amount of Ether Wind, it might be possible to protect ourselves with an outer layer that blocked physical interference. However, it would not be possible to defend everyone on the island.

"Tia will stop it! Tia can hack it once Tia goes near!"

Deploying her fictional armament wings, Tia took flight.

But at that moment, the bizarre noise grew more high-pitched and the light on the ship grew stronger and stronger.

"It's coming...! There's no time!"

Firill screamed.

"Our only choice is to block it head on!"

Ariella declared sharply and walked to the front of us.

"Lend your dark matter to me, everyone! I will deploy the biggest shield possible!"

"Mm!"

Ren immediately nodded and hugged Ariella's waist. I hastily placed my hand on Ariella's shoulder while Iris and the rest of the girls pressed their hands against Ariella's body.

"Tia will hurry to the ship while we're blocking it!"

"Got it!"

Tia nodded and flew into the sky.

At that moment, a beam of light was released from the ship. This was a terrifying light filled with darkness inside. It was extremely similar to the energy beam accompanying the supergravitional zone produced by Babel.

"Deploy shield—Seras Athena!"

The shield appearing over the sea blocked the scene of despair.

Expanding radially, the shield's form was reminiscent of a crystalline snowflake.

Accompanied by rumbling, the shockwave split the sea surface in two.

Blocking the battleship's attack, the gigantic shield glowed at the edges.

—BLAM!

But after a few seconds, deep cracks appeared in the shield.

"Guh..."

Ariella raised her right arm, the one equipped with her fictional armament, and made a pained sound.

"Sorry—I'm probably not helping much."

With the smallest generating capacity, I could only pass on a small amount of dark matter. Regretful of that, I apologized to Ariella but she shook her head lightly.

"It's fine... Mononobe-kun, you've already given me plenty of power. Last time... I quizzed you... on why my fictional armament was defensive gear, right?"

While doing everything she could to maintain the shield, Ariella asked in fragmented speech.

"Yeah—But my answer was totally wrong..."

The correct answer was because she must not wield a weapon in any shape or form. Aware of her own talent in murder, she had deliberately avoided giving herself a weapon to kill people easily.

"At the time, Mononobe-kun, you said... I did it... to protect Ren and the others. It was definitely way off... but... this answer is... very admirable. I want it to be true. That's why—"

Ariella's fictional armament was gradually disappearing. She was probably pouring all of her dark matter into the shield.

"I have to protect everyone. The people I must protect are behind the shield. I will block it no matter what comes!!"

Dark matter appeared at the shield's cracks, repairing the damage.

Despite cracking, shearing and shattering damage, the continuously repairing shield persisted in blocking the shot while lingering on the verge of collapse.

"Onee-chan, do your best!!"

Ren cried out as hard as she could. Large beads of sweat were appearing on her forehead. Right now, what sustained the shield was probably the dark matter from Ren's generating capacity that far exceeded the average.

Squeezing every last drop from her massive capacity to generate dark matter, she passed all of it to Ariella.

"Do your best, Ariella!"

Seeing Ren working hard, I continued to output my minuscule dark matter and encouraged Ariella.

"Yeah!!"

Ariella nodded firmly and continued to block the light of destruction with the giant shield.

—Bigii!!

The instant a critical noise sounded, the moment of termination arrived.

Ariella's shield had not been penetrated. The light illuminating the shield's outline instantly vanished.

"Ah—"

Ariella cried out in surprise then lost balance and fell over.

"Onee-chan!"

Ren cried out frantically. At the same time, I caught and supported Ariella.

"Don't worry... I'm just, a bit dizzy."

Ariella smiled wryly and looked at the shield collapsing on the sea surface.

"Tia-chan made it!"

Looking out at the battleship afar, Iris observed energetically.

The glowing horizon was turning red while the stars were gradually disappearing.

"...What a long night it was."

Mitsuki's voice was filled with fatigue as she sat down on the ground. It looked like she still had a fever. Sure enough, she had been pushing herself the whole time.

"Yeah, really long..."

After I concurred, the portable terminal in my shirt pocket vibrated. An incoming call.

I pressed the button to pick up and held the terminal to my ear, only to hear the voice of my cheerful "friend"—

Part 4

"Why... am I still alive?"

Lying on the ground, Loki Jotunheim stared blankly into the dawn sky.

"Naturally, that's because I healed you."

Surprisingly, the answer instantly came from beside his ear.

Shifting his gaze, he saw a young woman looking down at him.

"...Kili Surtr Muspelheim—"

Loki recited her name in surprise.

"You're so lucky. Since the damage to the internal organs was on the light side, it was within my power to heal others using biogenic transmutation, you know? Oh well, there might be after effects and rejection reactions afterwards, but whatever."

She shrugged lightly while speaking coldly.

"Why...? Was it to make the authority's transfer... incomplete...?"

Loki asked "why?" in a different sense than earlier.

Rather than wanting to know the cause of his survival, he wanted to know why the decision had been made to keep him alive.

"Wrong. It's to prevent you from being etched into Yuu's heart."

Kili answered enviously. She sighed deeply.

"If you died, Yuu will never forget you. Perhaps you might become the most important thing in his heart. This is something I absolutely forbid."

After saying that, Kili turned around.

Watching her recede into the distance, Loki muttered quietly.

"...How inane."

But after a while, he began to laugh.

Had he died, what would have happened afterwards? Obliterated together with Midgard at dawn? Although an incomplete replica of a weapon from a lost civilization, it was capable of firing one shot on the level of the original.

But right now, he was alive under the dawn sky. In other words, all his plans had ended in failure. To think he, supposed to be dead, had survived because of a certain person's excessively self-centered reason. This was completely out of left field.

"How inane—This humanlike ending."

His lips twisted in a grin, Loki muttered. With difficulty, he forced this body, barely clinging onto life, to sit up.

Now that he had survived, all he could do was apply himself to his work and given responsibilities.

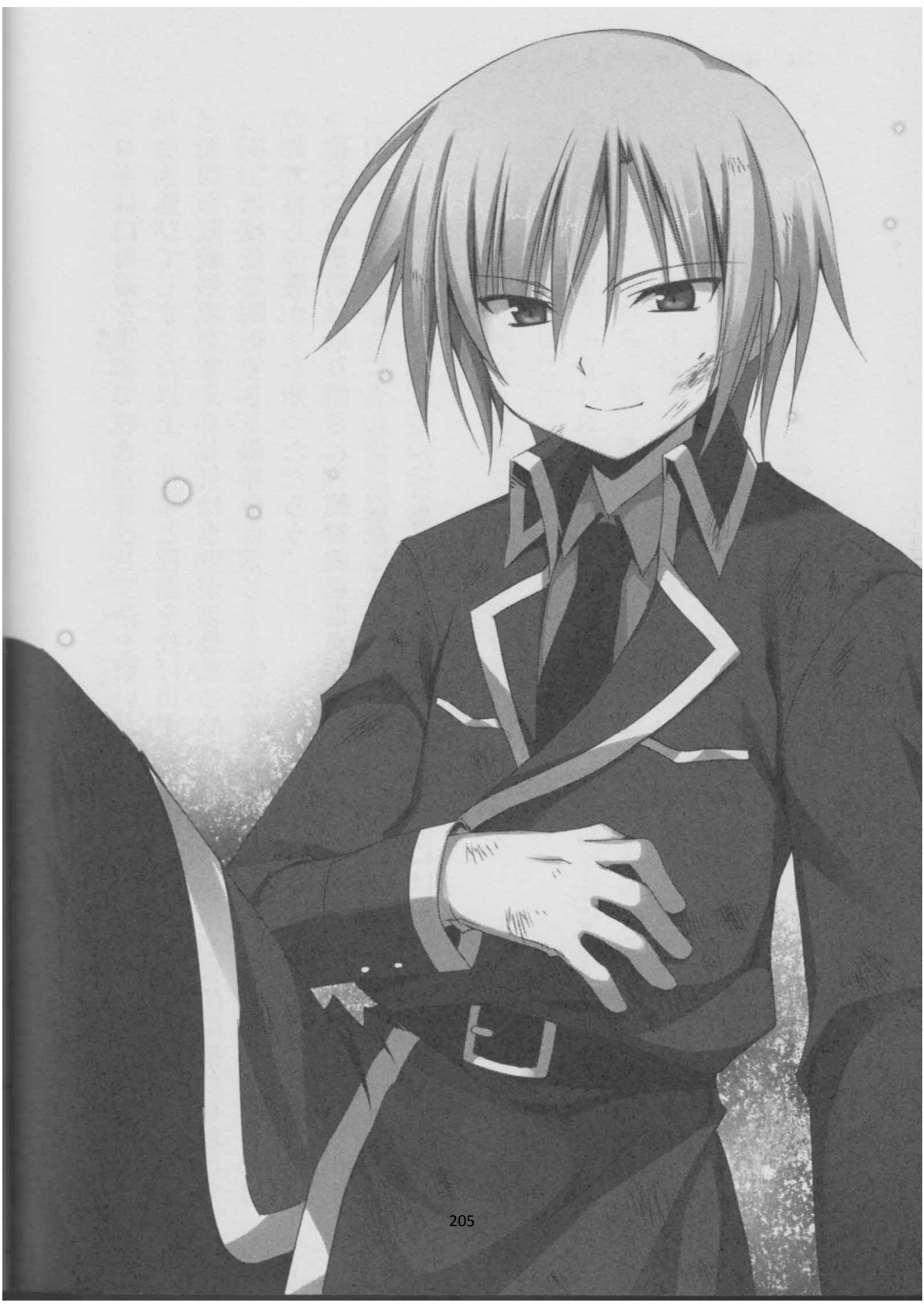
The thought of having to deal with a defeat's troublesome aftermath felt exceptionally depressing. Be that as it may, even though this was the worst-case scenario, he had still achieved his minimum objective.

Gray had discovered the critical point of her ability to control her authority—Through this incident, rulers trying to exploit her would probably realize their own folly.

The demands made upon her were going to be withdrawn and with that, the dream of achieving absolute world peace would vanish.

"Well, but this bit of accomplishment isn't enough for a 'hero'..."

Despite the intense self-mockery and sarcasm in his remark, Loki's face was showing delight.



Epilogue

"Mononobe-kun, how did we end up like this?"

Inside a cramped and stuffy bathroom, I heard Ariella's voice.

"It's... Ren who forced us into here."

While trying my best not to look at Ariella's body, I replied.

The two of us were each wrapped in a bath towel, alone here. Feeling self-conscious was unavoidable.

"Since everyone had a turn in the hot spring to talk to you, so I can't be the only exception, what a contrived reason, but..."

"Ren won't be happy unless it's the same."

I smiled wryly while responding to Ariella's grumbling.

"...I wouldn't find it unfair."

Ariella smiled and pulled on the edge of her tiny bath towel.

I could not help but feel my gaze drawn to those long and beautiful legs. I shook my head to dispel the dilemma.

Outside the bathroom, the rest of us were staying in Charlotte's private room.

Midgard was still in chaos despite surviving a major crisis. We were ordered to stay on standby here for now.

However, not everyone was present.

Handling various business in Charlotte's case and taking care of the aftermath for the defense system and unmanned weapons in Tia's case, the two of them had gone outside.

After returning from doing her own thing, Kili reported about her revival of Major Loki then left with Shinomiya-sensei to another room.

Perhaps while I was desperately suppressing Code Lost, it was thanks to Kili healing Major Loki that things had not reached a dire state.

Presemably, he would continue to treat Charlotte and the Ds as enemies, causing trouble for me. However... I could not hate him for shouldering everything on humanity's behalf.

Also, putting that aside, I was honestly quite happy to know that I had not broken my promise with Iris to not kill anyone.

I must thank Kili properly later... But what might she demand then? recalling her nocturnal visit, I felt a bit disturbed.

Slightly earlier, Ren had said "Onee-chan still hasn't shared a bath with Onii-chan, it's not fair!" Had Kili been present, it would have turned into quite a mess.

If I were to hazard a guess, Ren was probably standing sternly in front of the changing area right now like a gate guardian.

Mitsuki was among those who had shared a dip in the hotspring with me, so she could not muster a stern rebuttal, but that group did not include Tia or Kili.

"Oh well... Anyway, let's have a dip first since we've sweated so much."

When I made the suggestion, Ariella nodded.

"Yeah. It was such a long day, I'm all covered in sweat—"

While speaking, Ariella suddenly made a nervous look and took a step back away from me.

"I-I must reek of sweat!? I've got to hurry and shower first!"

Going red, Ariella swiftly turned the shower faucet.

"N-Not at all—"

I wanted to reassure her she did not, but my voice was drowned out by the noise from the fierce surge of water.

Ariella kept sweating being conscious of my presence. She fled into the bathtub.

"M-Mononobe-kun, come in too. Umm, if you don't submerge yourself, I won't know where to look."

Ariella averted her gaze in embarrassment and urged me.

"O-Oh okay, got it."

Although the critical part was covered, I suppose my exposed upper torso would still be quite embarrassing for Ariella. And her reaction was also making embarrassment surge from my heart too.

I rapidly rinsed myself under the shower then dipped myself into the tub.

"Phew..."

Surrounded by the warm bathwater, my nervousness naturally dissipated and I could not help but sigh out of comfort.

"Mononobe-kun, you've worked hard today."

Seeing me like that, Ariella praised me with a smile.

"Same to you, Ariella, you've worked hard too."

"Well... Half of it was reaping what I sowed."

Scratching her cheek, Ariella replied in a tone of self-deprecation.

"Even if that's true, in the other half, you did everything you could to protect everyone. Good work. You don't have to feel apologetic towards anyone."

Even towards yourself as well—To convey this message, I spoke in a serious tone of voice.

"Mononobe-kun... You're so kind."

She smiled shyly but after making eye contact with me, she went red and lowered her head.

"But... I hope you can stop saying such cool things. I'm too ashamed to look you in the face."

"S-Sorry."

I could not help but apologize to her. With her head bowed, Ariella's shoulders shook.

"Fufu, no need to say sorry. I'm the one at fault."

Saying that, she placed her hand over her chest. Then as though committing to some kind of decision, she suddenly raised her head.

"—Mononobe-kun, I've got a favor to ask you."

"What is it?"

Slightly stunned by her gaze, I asked in response.

"In truth... When you touched me and triggered the transformation, the feeling was quite vague. Although I remember us talking through our minds... But it's different from bodily contact... That's why, since Ren gave us this chance... I'd like a do over."

Saying that, her face turned even redder. Finally, just as her ears turned burning red, she spoke the final part of her request.

"Mononobe-kun—C-Could you touch me once, at my dragon mark? If you do that, I think I'll get a real sense of becoming the same as you."

"—Got it."

With virtually no hesitation, I nodded at Ariella who was staring at me seriously. Since she had put in so much effort to make her request, there was no way I could deny her.

However, there was a problem. Speaking of which, where was Ariella's dragon mark—

"Thank you... Mononobe-kun. Since it's underwater, it should be less embarrassing... Please proceed."

Despite her words, her face was already completely red. Ariella slowly approached me.

When she grabbed my arm in the water, my heart began to pound.

"Umm... Where do I touch—"

When I asked slightly anxiously, Ariella whispered at a barely audible volume.

"...Lower abdomen. Under the belly button... I-It'll be bad if you touch anywhere weird, so I'll guide you."

Saying that, Ariella pulled my arm hesitantly.

"—"

She guided my hand towards her lower abdomen. As a result, my face was steaming up while my entire body stiffened. My fingertips touched her supple and tender body submerged in the bathwater.

"Ah... Not, there... Higher—Don't move your fingers like that."

A struggling voice came out of Ariella's lips.

With her face bright red, she corrected my hand's position.

Still in contact with her skin, my fingertips moved upwards and stopped several centimeters higher.

"This place is... my dragon mark."

Despite looking very shy, Ariella declared with a contented expression.

"Really? So that's the spot I'm touching right now."

"Yeah... You're touching it."

Staring at me, Ariella smiled while blushing. Just as we were gazing into each other's eyes in sweet silence...

"—That's as far as you'll go."

I heard a voice overhead.

"What...?"

I looked up in surprise.

Since we were on the clock tower's top floor, there was no need to care about what was outside the window. However, Kili was currently hovering there, glaring at us with displeasure.

"Fufu, did I scare you? Last time, you interrupted me just as the mood was right. This is payback."

Kili laughed with delight and looked down at the stunned Ariella.

"What... When did you start—"

"Starting when you were asking Yuu to touch your dragon mark. Fufu— How does it feel to be interrupted at the most wonderful moment?"

"Y-You—"

Red in the face, Ariella stared at Kili, but at the same time, a commotion was heard in the direction of the changing area.

"Tia wants to bathe with Yuu too!"

"mE tOo! mE tOo!"

"S-Since Zwei is going, as her guardian, I must... with the Captain—"

"My friend! Young maidens! Bathe with me!!"

Tia, Shion, Jeanne and Charlotte's voices could be heard.

Jeanne had been unconscious while Shion was sleeping, but they must have woken up due to Tia and Charlotte's return.

"Mm~~! No way!"

Ren desperately resisted them but was evidently outnumbered.

At this time, Kili smiled fearlessly outside the window.

"In that case, I shall join in the bath too."

She left the window after saying that. Since the bathroom window could not be opened very far, she was probably planning to enter from the room's balcony.

"Looks like we'd better get out before the others barge in."

Smiling wryly, I suggested to Ariella, but for some reason, she lowered her eyes hesitantly. Gripping my arm, her hand applied even more force.

"...Ariella?"

"I don't mind sharing a bath with everyone. So—let's stay a while longer."

Unable to refuse her blushing request—I gathered my resolve to weather the onslaught of the incoming storm.

*

Although Mononobe Mitsuki was quite curious about the bathroom commotion, she went to the balcony to cool her body that felt like it was on fire.

—My body has been very hot ever since Nii-san touched me.

In the beginning, Mitsuki thought she had stayed in the hotspring for too long, but the symptoms worsened over time.

"Did I catch a cold...?"

If that were the case, exposing herself to the wind outdoors would be counterproductive, but even so, Mitsuki still felt like staying in a cooler place right now.

Also—

In trepidation, Mitsuki touched the back of her neck with her hand. The skin felt very hot against her fingertips. The heat source causing her body's anomaly was precisely the dragon mark on the back of her neck.

If that was really the case, then this was no cold. What she should be considering were the effects brought by transforming into the same kind.

"But... why just me—"

None of the others looked like they had experienced a similar change.

Hence, this almost seemed like her transformation was the only failure... Was it because she was not worthy of becoming her brother's mate? Mitsuki began to feel very worried.

"So hot..."

The heat became too much to endure for her fingertips touching the dragon mark, so Mitsuki moved her hand away. However, she was shocked when she looked at that hand.

"What is, this—"

The hand's outline was shimmering. Shimmering like a mirage. Next, her fingertips turned black one after another—

"Kyah!?"

Mitsuki screamed and shook her hand. Next, the unstable outline and blackness disappeared. Mitsuki's hand went back to normal.

...Was this an illusion?

Although this was not the only possibility, Mitsuki then heard a dissenting voice next to her ear.

"I see—So this is the situation. Now 'tis finally clear to me."

"...Vritra?"

Vritra had opened the window without her noticing and was now staring intently at Mitsuki.

"Previously, when I attempted to harm thee, that person expressed unusual rage. That was probably an instinctive act as Neun. As the ninth counterdragon, that person already knew what he should be doing."

"What are you talking about...? Are you speaking of Nii-san?"

Mitsuki asked in confusion. Next, Vritra looked at Mitsuki sharply.

With intense hostility, she then said:

"Indeed—That person is protecting thee in order to obey a counterdragon's instinct. 'Tis because the ninth calamity, which shall bring destruction to the world, *is within you*."

滅ぼす九番目の災厄は、汝の中にあるのだから」

Afterword

This is Tsukasa.

With the release of *Unlimited Fafnir X: Invisible Successor*, this series welcomes its tenth volume.

"X"... What a cool letter. Using roman numerals to label volumes is really wonderful.

Now that we've reached the milestone of double digits, no easy task, this time, let me talk about the series' creation environment which I haven't really mentioned so far.

The first volume of *Unlimited Fafnir* was written on my old desktop computer back home. As for how old, the version of Word still had the "97" in its name.

Since it was too ancient, that computer could not open new versions of Word and Excel documents, causing quite a lot of hassle. The rundown hard drive would make motor-like noises when booting up. Anyway, it was really annoying.

However, this computer had been in the house before I entered university. Using it all along to write my inferior essays, I've always treasured it with love and care. Personally, I planned to keep using it until it broke down completely.

However, because it was hard to transport it when I moved to the capital (which is true too as part of the desktop meaning), this ancient desktop machine was left back home.

After that, what took over was the laptop I had been using at the same time. To be honest, it's not as easy to type as on the desktop, but since I was moving to Tokyo, I had to rely on it for the time being.

When editing Volume 1's draft, I remember I was using cardboard boxes as a table, putting my laptop on top to do my work (it took almost two weeks for the table I bought to be delivered).

Word had advanced to the latest version all at once, so I could now open new files. However, because the increase in functions was too much, I even felt dizzy in the beginning...

But then again, did I use the laptop too roughly? One day, when I was opening the display, the hinge broke with a snap.

Luckily, the computer's functionality was not compromised. But worried when it might break again, I bought a new one—And right now, I'm using it to write this afterword.

Compared to my series before *Fafnir*, my writing environment has become much bigger.

However, I have no plans to change the mood and themes in my works.

In this Volume 10, I wrote out to my heart's content all the scenes I've always wanted to depict.

It feels like I've overcome a huge mountain.

However, the real climax has yet to come, so I have to continue working hard until then. If possible, I hope all of you dear readers could accompany Yuu and his buddies to the very end.

Now for acknowledgements.

Korie Riko-sensei, thank you for drawing such a cool cover featuring Yuu and Major Loki!

Iris, Ariella and the rest of the girls are super cute in both the color and monochrome illustrations. Too awesome. Please continue to look after me!

Editor in charge, Shouji-sama, I thank you again for completing your work seriously and swiftly despite your busy schedule. I think you are definitely overworked so please take care of your health!

Finally, let me express my sincere gratitude to all of you, dear readers.

Well then, see you next volume.

Tsukasa, September 2015

あとがき

ファコニール10巻!!
ついに2ケタに!

男性キャラを描くのは
まだまだ苦手ですが
ロキ少佐好きなので
あとがきに描かせて
いただきましたっ

10巻は読んでいて
ハラハラしました0_0;

柚木りこ

Illustrator's Afterword

Fafnir's 10th volume!!

Finally double digits!

Although I'm still no good at drawing male characters, I really love Major Loki so here's another one of him in the afterword.

Volume 10 was definitely quite the thrilling ride O_O;

Korie Riko